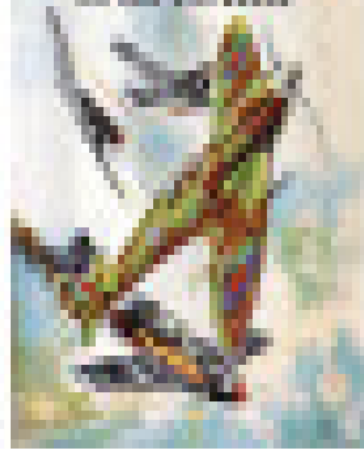


Spitfire Parade

Captain W.J. 20000



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CAPTAIN W.E. JOHNS



BIGGLES'S PHILOSOPHY

When you are flying, everything is all right or it is not all right. If it is all right there is no need to worry. If it is not all right one of two things will happen. Either you will crash or you will not crash.

If you do not crash there is no need to worry. If you do crash one of two things is certain.

Either you will be injured or you will not be injured.

If you are not injured there is no need to worry. If you are injured one of two things is certain. Either you will recover or you will not recover.

If you recover there is no need to worry. If you don't recover you can't worry.

CHAPTER I

BIGGLES TAKES OVER

A RAW north-easterly wind swept gustily across the Weald of Kent, tearing the sagging nimbus clouds into shreds of dripping vapour and tugging at the camouflaged bough-shelters which housed the aircraft of Number 666 Fighter Squadron, until the fabric flapped heavily, like wet sails, in protest. Quietly, almost furtively, three Spitfires in vee formation dropped out of the murk above the rain-soaked turf; with engines throttled back they circled once, losing height, and then, still in formation, came to rest near the farm-house that served both as an Officers' Mess and the Squadron Office. Mechanics ran out to take charge of the machines, while the pilots, after an appraising glance round the landing-ground, walked towards the building.

One strode a little in front of the others. His step was light and his figure slim, almost boyish, but his bearing was that of a man of experience. His deep-set hazel eyes were never still and held a curious glint, a sort of speculative fire, that seemed to be in keeping with a pale, clean-shaven face upon which the strain of war and the sight of sudden death had graven little lines. His hands, as small and delicate as those of a girl, were nearly lost in the fur of the gloves they carried.

Of the two who followed closely at his heels one was of about the same age and build, but his manner was

nonchalant, and his expression one of slightly bored humour. The other was a mere lad, with curious inquiring eyes; but his air was alert, and he carried himself in a way that suggested a degree of self-confidence hardly to be expected in one so young. A wisp or two of ginger hair escaped under the rim of the flying cap which he had just loosened.

As the trio reached the farm-house a door opened, and a man of uncertain age, with a black shade over one eye, and the single wing of an Air Gunner above the purple and white ribbon of the Military Cross on his breast, appeared in the doorway. For a moment he stared at the approaching officers; then a glad cry of welcome broke from his lips.

'Biggles, by all that's wonderful!' he cried. 'I didn't expect you.'

Squadron Leader James Bigglesworth, D.S.O., D.F.C., better known in flying circles as Biggles', after a brief pause to survey the man in front of him, hurried forward with outstretched hand.

'Toddy!' he exclaimed delightedly. 'What are you doing here?' He turned to the two officers who were with him, Flight Lieutenant the Hon. Algernon Lacey, D.F.C., and Pilot Officer 'Ginger' Hebblethwaite. 'Algy, you remember Toddy, Recording Officer at 266 Squadron in the old days?' Without waiting for an answer he went on quickly. Oh, and Toddy, this is Ginger Hebblethwaite, a protégé of mine.'

There was a general handshaking.

'I've heard about you fellows,' declared Toddy. 'I've seen your names in the papers, too.'

You seem to have got over a nice time, flying round the world and what-not.'

'Not so bad,' admitted Biggles, smiling. But that's all over now. We're back again in harness — I mean, real harness. But tell us about yourself, you old war-horse.'

Apparently you couldn't keep out of it.'

Toddy laughed quietly. Of course not,' he said softly. They let me come back as a Flight Loot — ground duties only, of course. I was posted here as Station Adjutant, but nobody told me that you were going to command the Squadron.'

Biggles nodded. 'Colonel Raymond was responsible for that, no doubt — you remember Raymond, our Wing Intelligence Officer? He's an Air Commodore at the Air Ministry now, and, incidentally, a friend of ours; we've done odd jobs for him from time to time.'

Knowing that we were together in the last war, he must have arranged this reunion, feeling sure that I'd be pleased about it.' Biggles clapped his old friend on the shoulder to show his appreciation.

What have you been doing up to now?' asked Toddy.

'Oh, one thing and another — special missions mostly; but I got fed up with that and insisted on getting back to a fighter squadron, so the Ministry decided to give me a squadron of my own and allowed me to

bring Algy and Ginger with me. We'll see what we can do to stop these Hun raiders. Where's everybody?'

Toddy smiled wanly, and for a moment looked uncomfortable. 'I'm afraid they haven't given you much of a squadron — at any rate, not so far.'

'What do you mean?'

Well, apparently 666 is a new squadron, just formed. The airmen are here, and a few machines, but when I arrived there wasn't an officer on the place. Two turned up this morning though, two flying officers named Ferris and O'Hara.'

Where are they ?'

'Down in B Flight shed, looking fed to the teeth, the last I saw of them. By the way, the airmen are under your old fitter, Flight Sergeant Smyth.'

Again Biggles looked pleased. 'Raymond must have fixed that, too,' he declared. Still, I don't quite understand what's happening —'

'There's some official correspondence on your desk; perhaps it will explain things,'

suggested Toddy. 'Let's go in.'

Biggles took off his flying kit and hung it on a peg. 'Don't go away,' he told the others. 'I'

ll just glance through the mail, then we'll have a look round. Oh, and by the way, you fellows, don't call me Biggles - at least, not in front of the others. I've got to make some show of discipline.'

Seating himself at the C.O.'s desk, he began opening the letters that lay on it. As he read one, rather longer than the rest, an extraordinary expression crept over his face; but it turned slowly to a smile as he raised his eyes to his friends, who were watching him 'I ought to have known there was a trick in it,' he murmured, a trifle sarcastically. Just listen to this. It's a letter from Raymond, and it certainly explains things.

"My dear Bigglesworth,

"In case you feel that you have been given an unusual command, I'd

better tell you about it. I'm responsible. The fact is, we've started a new stunt, a little register of star turns and officers who do not take kindly to discipline. As you probably know, they've always been a problem you know the type I mean. The ass on the ground is often the ace in the air. It's no use keeping these fellows on the ground, it only makes them worse, so we have decided to send them, as an experiment, to a special squadron, in the hope that they will at least kill a few Boche before killing themselves in some foolhardy escapade. In view of your long and varied experience we have put you in command of this squadron, and I, personally, have no doubt that you will be able to build up a good team. These officers will be reporting to you immediately.

"A word of warning. Don't judge them by appearances. Give them plenty of rope and they'll make things hum, although in doing so they are likely to lead you a lively dance.

Take Lissie - Lord Lissie - for example. He's a Flight Lieutenant, and should make you a brilliant, if somewhat eccentric, Flight Commander; he's a devil with a Spitfire and a wizard with a gun, but I'm afraid he's as mad as a hatter. Carrington is another queer case. His trouble is that he's got an inferiority complex - thinks people are laughing at him behind his back because he's a Cockney -and tries to hide it by a show of cheek.

Added to that, the war is a personal matter with him; his parents were killed in one of the first raids on the East End. I doubt if he should have been given a commission, but it's too late to alter that now. For heaven's sake, don't laugh at him or he's liable to shoot up your mess. He went through the School of Fighting in ten days, and left behind him a trail of broken aeroplanes and nerve-shattered instructors. I believe his flying is ghastly to watch; he's got his own ideas, and nothing will prise him off them. For the past month he's been with a Coastal Squadron, and as he was popular there he must have his points.

Now he's all yours. Just let him go.

"Ferris and O'Hara are friends; they are queer birds, and as yet without experience, but they show promise so I am sending them to you. Other officers will follow in due course.

I'll try to let you have some more machines shortly - I have an idea you'll need them.

"Best of luck,

"Yours sincerely." '

As Biggles finished reading he dropped the letter on the desk and looked up. The others were smiling.

'I don't see anything to laugh at,' he observed seriously. 'Don't forget, I shall be responsible for this unit, and judging from that letter I'm going to have a squadron of lunatics.'

Raymond tells you not to judge by appearances,' Algy pointed out.

'Perhaps he's right. We'll wait until —' Biggles started as there cut in across his words a most extraordinary noise.

Algy ducked. 'Good lord! What's that ?' he gasped. I thought at first it was a siren.'

Biggles sprang up and made for the door. As he did so there was a sudden pandemonium outside. And instant later a cat, hotly pursued by a mongrel terrier, shot into the, office.

The cat took a flying leap on to Biggles's desk, scattering the papers, and then, with the same urgent alacrity with which it had entered, went through the open window. The terrier baulked, let out a shrill yell of excitement, and tore back through the door.

Simultaneously the shrill blast of a hunting horn split the air.

'What the —' Again Biggles strode towards the door, but stopped abruptly, staring in amazement, as a curious figure entered. It was that of a tall, slim young man in Air Force uniform bearing the badges of rank of a Flight Lieutenant on his sleeve. Over his left arm, in disarray, hung a bundle of flying kit. His jacket was undone, revealing a yellow suede hunting waistcoat with silver, crested buttons. In his hand he carried a small brass hunting horn. He started, and then smiled faintly when his eyes fell on Biggles.

Nobody, not even his best friend, would have called Lieutenant Lord Bertie Lissie handsome, or his face a strong face. On the contrary, his small aristocratic features had, at Cranwell, once inspired an adaptation of his name to Cissy'. But only once. Such decorations as his face boasted, a wisp of hay-coloured moustache and a rimless eyeglass, did nothing to correct this impression, however. But his eyes were extra-ordinarily blue and curiously bright.

For a moment he regarded Biggles meditatively, then smiled apologetically.

'What cheer,' he said, with a slight lisp. Sorry to butt in and all that.'

Biggles eyed him coldly. 'You don't by any chance happen to be reporting to this squadron for duty, do you ?'

Lord Bertie nodded. That was the general scheme,' he announced.

Biggles took a deep breath. 'And your name is, I suspect, Lissie. Am I right?'

Again Bertie nodded. 'Absolutely,' he confirmed. 'Yes, absolutely right.'

'Do you usually report to a new unit like this?' inquired Biggles in a voice heavy with sarcasm.

'It all depends,' replied Bertie readily. 'I'm really most frightfully sorry and all that, but I was told that no one had yet arrived, so I thought I'd give Towser a spot of exercise – if you see what I mean.'

Towser ?'

'My little doggie. You saw him perhaps ? Jolly little feller.' Biggles stiffened. 'Yes, I saw him,' he said slowly. 'What's the idea of the hunting horn ?'

Bertie regarded the instrument in his hand as if he had only just noticed it. 'You mean this? Oh, yes. Well, the fact is, at my last station we got so bored, me and Towser, that we thought we'd have a little huntin' – if you see what I mean. But not having any foxes we had to hunt cats, and I'm afraid Towser has got into bad habits. Of course, he wouldn't

hurt a cat even if he caught it. He just wants to play with them, that's all.'

Biggles's lips curled slightly. 'His idea and the cat's idea of playing are probably two quite different things,' he murmured.

At this point the conversation was interrupted by the telephone. Biggles picked up the receiver, held a brief conversation, and put it down again.

'That was Fighter Command on the phone,' he announced. 'We've got a job to do. A Blenheim is on the way to Calais to take photos of the

docks, and it may need an escort home. Lissie, I shall want you to take over B Flight, so you may as well start. You'll find two officers in the shed. Their names are Ferris and O'Hara. Take them along and bring the Blenheim home. We'll finish this conversation later.

Bertie's eyes brightened. He buttoned his tunic. What fun,' he chortled enthusiastically, and with a perfunctory salute left the room.

Biggles sat down heavily, looking at Algy, Ginger, and Toddy in turn. Raymond was right,' he said slowly. 'That fellow's off his rocker. I expect he takes his little horn with him when he goes Hun-hunting. Well, if the rest of the officers they send along are anything like him, heaven help me; this won't be a squadron, it'll be a mad-house.' He winced as from the distance came the blast of the horn.

Ginger shook his head wonderingly. 'Nuts,' he breathed. Absolutely crackers.'

Biggles stared at him helplessly. What have I done to deserve this ?' he whispered plaintively.

A ray of moist sunshine filtered through the clouds and for a moment bathed the landscape in a golden glow. It rested lightly on the farmhouse, and then moved to the shelter that housed the Spitfires of B Flight, but it was unnoticed by the two flying officers who sat on the wheels of a camouflaged aircraft engaged in earnest, if somewhat desultory, conversation. In appearance they had nothing in common -- not that there was any reason why they should have had anything in common, beyond the fact that before the war had snatched them from their civil occupations they had been members of the same Auxiliary Squadron.

George 'Ferocity' Ferris had got his commission on sheer flying ability. There was nothing else he could have got one on, for his family connexions were obscure, and the back street of Liverpool wherein he lived, while it may have been all that it should be, was hardly a recommendation.

So had it not been for his amazing - and sometimes alarming - flying, it is likely that the Selection Committee of the Air Ministry would have looked askance at his pungent Merseyside accent, his perky freckled face, and bristling yellow hair. Nevertheless, nobody - at least, not in his home town ever referred to this, for he was sensitive about it, and to back up any argument that might arise he had a fighting record that had earned for him the significant name of

Ferocity'. He had learned to fly at his own expense, and forthwith revealed that his nimbleness was not confined to the boxing ring where, as an amateur, he sometimes performed.

His companion, Tex O'Hara, sometime of Cactusville, Texas, U.S.A., was tough—and proud of it. Short but heavily built, he retained many of the not altogether pleasing manners of the Texas prairie whereon his Irish-born parents had brought him into the world.

A natural intolerance of anything in the nature of 'fancy-pants' had not been softened by two years as a New York cop', a turbulent career that had been terminated when he had the unpardonable effrontery to arrest a well-known gangster, whose boys' had promptly put him on the spot.

His superior officer had pushed him out of the country, not so much from a humane desire to save his life as to prevent him from being the cause of any more trouble. Seething with indignation for getting the sack for an effort which he had fondly supposed would have brought him promotion, it was a sore ex-cop who had landed at Liverpool, where he had glowered about like a baited bull for something on which to let loose the steam of his wrath.

Why he chose an aeroplane was something he himself did not know—unless it was because it provided a ready means of breaking something, if only himself. Running out of cash, he joined the Auxiliary Air Force, not so much from any particular desire to attack the king's enemies as to continue flying.

He got his military ticket just in time for the war, much to his satisfaction, for the wish to

'plug somebody' was still uppermost in his mind, and he wasn't particular who it was.

That he had not yet succeeded in doing this was the subject on which he had just been unburdening his overcharged soul, rolling a cheap cigar from one side of his mouth to the other in his agitation.

'Pal,' he assured Ferocity earnestly, if the guy who called this a war was right here, I'd hand him a basinful of slugs to cut his teeth on.'

'This may be him coming now,' returned Ferocity moodily dropping the stub of his cigarette into the mud and putting his heel on it as footsteps were heard approaching.

Both pilots gazed expectantly as the piece of dirty sacking that hung over the front edge of the shelter was lifted slowly and Lord Bertie entered. He considered the two men in front of him with frank disfavour before moving nearer, picking his way carefully across the muddy floor.

‘What-ho,’ he greeted at last, with just enough suspicion of a lisp to make Tex’s lips curl.

Nobody answered.

‘Sorry to butt in and all that,’ murmured Bertie apologetically, but is this B Flight?’

‘I guess it is,’ returned Tex briefly.

‘I guessed it was, too,’ replied Bertie, smiling wanly. ‘Are you fellers waitin’ for something?’

‘Just waiting for the war to start, that’s all,’ observed Ferocity, in a voice loaded with bitter sarcasm.

‘Ah! Then I have arrived at the right moment – absolutely the right moment,’ murmured Bertie. ‘I’ve just been posted to this jolly old squadron, and the C.O. has asked me to take over B Flight.’

‘Is that so?’ drawled Tex, eyeing his Flight Commander with a fresh interest.

‘That, as you say, is so; absolutely so,’ declared Bertie. ‘By the way, my name’s Lissie.’

A slow smile spread over Tex’s face.

‘Forgive me for being inquisitive, but does that in some way strike you as – er –

humorous?’ Bertie’s tone was mild, but there was a curious gleam in his eye.

Tex noted it and changed his mind about what he was going to say.

‘It’s a funny war,’ he compromised.

‘So far – so far,’ murmured Bertie. ‘Do you fellers happen to know anything about war flying?’

Plenty,' drawled Tex.

`By Jove, that's fine! Where did you do your scrappin' ?' `Read about it in books – lapped it up since I was a kid.' Bertie looked disappointed.

Ìt isn't quite the same thing, you know,' he said sadly. `Perhaps it would be a good thing if we had a little practice. B Flight has been detailed for an escort job.' Bertie glanced at his wrist watch. We leave the ground in five minutes. See you later. Cheer-oh.' He nodded, and still picking his way, moved towards the exit.

`By the way, which of you is O'Hara ?' he inquired from the doorway.

Tex stood up. `Me, I guess.'

Ì guessed it, too,' said Bertie softly, and the sack dropped back into place.

Tex stared at it fixedly. Stiffen the crows,' he muttered brokenly. Lissie, eh?' He turned to Ferocity. Where did England get the idea that she could win this war?'

Àsk Lissie,' suggested Ferocity, grinning.

Lissie ! Suffering coyotes! That dumb-bell.'

Ferocity shook his head. ' You can't always tell, mate,' he said cautiously. 'A little dude like that once slammed me a wallop on the boko that put me to sleep for ten minutes.'

`No fooling—what for?'

Ì barged into him by accident.'

`Didn't you tell him that?'

`He didn't give me time,' admitted Ferocity ruefully. Okay. Well, let's get going,'

suggested Tex. 'I'm anxious

to see what Lissie does when a bunch of slugs hits his crate.' Ìt ought to be funny,'

grinned Ferocity.

Tex tossed his cigar aside. Yeah, I reckon so,' he smiled.

Five minutes later, in full flying kit and parachute harness, they reported to their new Flight Commander, who, similarly dressed, was standing beside his Spitfire. His face was expressionless and his manner one of slightly bored indifference.

'Now this is the idea,' he said. 'One of our chappies, in a Blenheim, is taking photos at Calais. He went over high, up, and will probably dive on the objective; after getting his snaps he will run for home. We're going to meet him in case he needs help. Get the scheme ?'

Ferocity nodded.

Sure,' murmured Tex. 'What happens if we run into a bunch of Huns?'

Berne looked mildly surprised at the question. 'What happens?' He wrinkled his forehead in a puzzled frown. Surely only one thing can happen. Why, what did you think might happen ?'

Tex flushed slightly. 'I thought you might – come home.'

Bertie nodded understandingly. 'I see. Oh, no – absolutely no. Only the best men of each side will go home. As far as we're concerned, nobody goes home until I lead the way –

unless, of course, I'm on the grass or in the drink. Is that quite clear?'

'I guess so,' nodded Tex.

Bertie eyed him dispassionately.

'For your sake I hope you've guessed right,' he said softly. 'Let's get away.'

The three pilots climbed into their seats. The three engines thundered, and the three airscrews, as constant in their position as if they belonged to one machine, flashed across the turf. At a thousand feet above the boundary of the aerodrome the leading machine turned slowly, with its up-tilted nose pointing towards the south. The others followed. The Channel came into view, an expanse of grey water, with the dim outline of the French coast beyond, an outline that grew harder as the Spitfires bored their way towards it.

Long before they reached it their discovery by the enemy was announced by the arrival of several brisk salvos of archie'. Tex looked at Ferocity, who was flying on his left, and then 'back at their leader, still holding on his course regardless of the swirling bursts of black

smoke that came ever closer to them.

'The poor guy must be blind as well as dumb,' Tex told himself hopelessly, for Bertie appeared to look neither to one side nor the other; apparently he was unconscious of what was going on around him. And when, a moment later, a group of six bursts mushroomed out a short distance in front of the leading Spitfire, and the machine roared straight through them without altering its course, Tex knew that his worst fears were realized.

'The poor sap isn't only dumb; he's crazy,' he thought moodily, wondering how long it would be before they were shot down.

So engrossed was he in this disturbing reverie that he made the blunder usual in such cases. It would not be true to say that he forgot where he was; there was no chance of him doing that; but he forgot to maintain the vigilance which such conditions demand.

As usual, this resulted in a second blunder. He looked across at Ferocity, smiling what he imagined to be a smile of consolation and encouragement. His eyes were off his leader for perhaps two seconds. When he looked back the Spitfire that had been leading was no longer there.

At first he refused to believe it. Or perhaps it would be more correct to say that his brain was incapable of accepting the evidence which his eyes revealed. For an indisputable fact, it took him a long time to grasp it — at least three seconds, during which time he had travelled a considerable distance. At last, the fact having penetrated, he looked across at Ferocity to see what he was going to do. At least, that was his idea. But Ferocity wasn't there, either.

'Say, what is this?' he muttered angrily.

The answer came with a suddenness that took his breath away; took his breath away so quickly that his lips went dry. For a moment he thought his wing was torn out by the roots, for that was what the sound was like, and he gasped his relief when he saw it was still there.

'Something must have hit it,' he thought. And then, and not until then, did it occur to him to look up to see if there was anything there to account for the phenomenon.

There was. In fact, there were so many things that he was shocked into a sort of paralysis. The sky was full of aeroplanes. Just how many

there were he did not know, for he didn't stop to count them. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a vaguely familiar silhouette streaking towards his tail, a silhouette which he had been taught was peculiar to an aeroplane of German design called a Messerschmitt.

Simultaneous with this knowledge there came again the horrid tearing sound, and something struck the heel of his boot so viciously that the impulse was communicated to the rudder-bar, with the result that, having no time to bank, the machine skidded so wildly that it made him feel physically sick. The sensation of facing one direction while travelling in another at something over three hundred miles an hour wasn't pleasant.

As soon as the centrifugal force which had pinned him to the side of the machine relaxed, he lost no time in doing things, He did everything he could think of — and several things he didn't think of. He pulled the joystick back and fired his guns. At least, the guns went off, and it may have been the vibration of them, to which he was accustomed, that restored his sense of balance.

Training taught him that he ought to find his leader, and he was about to take steps to put this matter right when a dark grey shape loomed alongside and caused him to swerve nervously. But he kept his eyes on it, and saw, with an emotion of thankfulness that was almost overwhelming, that it was the very man he was looking for — his leader.

Breathing deeply in his relief, he looked at the Flight Commander's face curiously.

There seemed to be something

strange about it. Then he saw what it was. He was not wearing goggles, but in the expressionless face something gleamed brightly. Tex saw that it was an eyeglass.

'The fellow must be balmy,' he told himself unbelievably.

Bertie did not look at him again. He bored on ahead and took his place at the head of the formation, for in some strange way Ferocity had appeared on the left. His flying seemed rather wild.

Tex had just settled down in his seat when the Flight Commander disappeared again.

But this time he saw him go. He just caught sight of his tail as the

machine tilted down steeply and roared earthward. Sheer habit made him thrust his joy-stick forward, and a fierce exultation swept through him as the Spitfire howled defiance to the atmosphere and anything else that was about.

As it hapened, there were several other things about. Amongst them were a number of Messerschmitt 109's and a Blenheim, a Blenheim that swerved from side to side as it dodged to avoid the fire that was being directed on it from several angles.

Tex knew exactly what to do. He had read about this sort of thing in books, and been told about it at the training school. The trouble was, he couldn't remember it. The sight of tracer streaming from his leader's guns gave him an inkling of it, however, and he plunged into the melee with his guns snarling and growling. Such was his frantic haste to fire that his first burst nearly hit the tail of the Blenheim. Then he picked out a machine carrying a black cross, and he brought his sights to bear. But before he could fire the machine had disappeared, and an instant later his Spitfire shuddered as something like a whiplash struck it.

The sound roused him to a sort of frenzy. He forgot his books. He forgot his training. He forgot everything in one overwhelming desire to see who was hitting him, and he swung round in such a tight turn that he almost collided with his pursuer. Its underside passed so close to his head that he could distinctly see mud on it.

He looked again for the Blenheim, and managing to pick it out, he raced after it, only to swerve as a stream of bullets poured from it in his direction.

'What does that fool gunner think he's doing?' he muttered disgustedly. ' Can't he tell a Spitfire from a Messer —'

He ducked as a mass of flame roared down past him. He did not see where it came from.

He did not see where it went. He caught a reek of burning as he swept through the trail of it, and then his attention was drawn to no fewer than five machines that were all turning in a tight circle not far away. The first one was a Messerschmitt. Close behind it was Ferocity in his Spitfire; behind, in line, were three more Messerschmitts At least three of the machines were shooting.

For the first time the picture was clear cut, and Tex was able to think coherently; he almost smiled as he trimmed his nose to the third

machine and roared down with his guns blazing.

He saw the first of the three Messerschmitts steepen its dive until it was going down vertically, and the third machine – the one he was shooting at – break out of the dogfight.

He was after it in a flash.

How far he would have followed it had not Bertie cut across his nose and glared at him, mouthing furiously, is a matter for conjecture; but in obedience to the Flight Commander's angry signals he abandoned his quarry and headed back towards the Blenheim, now a mere speck in the distance.

The two Spitfires, flying side by side, soon caught up with it, and took up position behind it, in which formation they

were joined by Ferocity. They flew close together, so close that Tex was able to make out bullet holes in both the other Spitfires, and he was horrified to see how badly they had been shot about.

'They've sure been through the mill,' he told himself, wondering what had become of the Messerschmitts.

The Blenheim tilted its nose down and raced back over the white cliffs of Dover to safety. The Spitfires followed it until they were well over England, where they left it, Bertie leading his flight back to the squadron aerodrome. The machines landed together and taxied to their quarters, where mechanics awaited them.

Tex switched off, jumped down, and walked across to where Ferocity was also descending.

'Say! Those Messers have sure made a colander of your kite,' he grinned.

Ferocity eyed him sarcastically. Did you say my kite?' Sure.'

'Then take a look at your own.'

Tex swung round and stared incredulously at the shot-torn fuselage of his machine. Say, what d'you know about that?' he breathed.

Ànd take a look at Lissie's,' murmured Ferocity.

Tex stared again. 'Holy mackerel! How did he get it in that mess ?'

Ferocity raised an eyebrow. 'D'you mean to say you don't know ?'

`How should I?'

'You ought to. Twice you had a Messerschmitt on your tail and Lissie shot it off. He got two in flames.'

`Did he get that one that nearly fell on me?'

`He certainly did. He was just about in time, too, I reckon.' The arrival of the Flight Commander, with his eyeglass still

in place, interrupted the dialogue. He considered his two subordinates steadily.

Ì say, you fellers, that wasn't bad, not bad at all,' he said almost warmly.

Ferocity smiled. Thanks,' he said.

Tex frowned. 'Could we have done anything else?' he inquired.

Òh, yes,' replied Bertie unhesitatingly. 'Absolutely. It's always a good thing to look where you're going, and to shoot at the chappies of the other side when there are any about.'

Tex blinked. What do you mean — fellers of the other side?'

`That's right. You nearly shot my tail off — twice. Try to remember it next time. Good fun, war flying, isn't it?'

Tex smiled. 'You're telling me.'

Bertie's face thawed. Yes, I'm telling you. But let's get along and make out our reports. It'

s an awful bore, but it must be done.'

In the Squadron Office Bertie took off his flying kit, and then, under his `wings', the others saw the ribbons of the D.F.C. and A.F.C.

`Just imagine that,' whispered Tex to Ferocity. 'A little runt like that with a couple of gongs.'

Ànd they take some getting nowadays'

Ì guess if I stay in this outfit long enough I shall learn a thing or two,'

conceded Tex.

`How we win our wars, for instance,' grinned Ferocity.

1 Service slang for medals.

CHAPTER 2

THE COMING OF

CARRINGTON

WITH his second-in-command, Flight Lieutenant Ælgy Lacy (Senior Flight Lieutenant on the station), at his elbow, Squadron Leader Bigglesworth sat at his desk working on the establishment of the squadron under his command.

‘In the matter of officers we're not doing so badly,’ he observed. ‘You will, of course, take over A Flight. You can have Ginger. I'll fly with you myself whenever possible to fill the gap until another officer arrives. Lissie will take B Flight, with Ferris and O'Hara.

I think I heard them return just now from that escort job, so I'll have a word with them presently. We shall have to leave C Flight for the time being.’

Ælgy picked up a posting slip. ‘You might put Carrington in my flight, when he arrives.

That would give us two complete flights, and I could keep an eye on him until we see how he shapes. He's due now.’

‘Judging from the particulars, we have of him, he's likely be a difficult fellow to handle.’

‘As long as he doesn't arrive with the idea of running the squadron I don't mind,’

murmured Ælgy. He glanced at the clock. ‘You might start him in the right place by rapping his knuckles for reporting late.’

‘He's not late yet.’

‘He will be in another minute, and if he comes by air, as I imagine he will, the muck up topsides will probably delay him. The weather's getting worse. Hulloo! What's going on?’

He hurried to the window as the roof vibrated with the roar of a low-flying aircraft.

Biggles joined him.

The vague shape of a Spitfire could just be seen through the rain, side-slipping so steeply that nothing short of a miracle could prevent it from hitting the ground, wing first. The miracle happened. Algy clutched at Biggles's arm as the machine banked vertically ten feet above the turf and came to rest, nose to wind, on the tarmac.

Biggles flushed and made for the door. 'I don't care who he is, but I'm not having that sort of thing here,' he snapped.

'I wouldn't be in a hurry,' advised Algy. 'It might be Carrington.'

'Perhaps you're right,' agreed Biggles, taking a cigarette from his case and tapping it on the lid. 'Here he comes.'

A small, hatless, leather-clad figure had detached itself from the machine, and was walking briskly towards the office. His flying jacket was too large, and flapped against thigh boots that were out of proportion to the wearer's 'size.

Biggles went back to his desk. A moment later the door opened and Toddy, the Station Adjutant, put his head inside. There was a curious expression on his face.

'Pilot Officer Carrington, reporting for duty, sir,' he said, and stepped aside.

The new-comer walked slowly into the room and stood stiffly to attention. 'I'm Carrington, sir,' he said, with a suspicion of Cockney accent.

'Will you please salute when you come into this office,' returned Biggles curtly.

'Regulations say you only salute when wearing a hat, sir.' 'What do you mean by coming here without a hat? Where is your hat?'

'Nailed up in Number 8 Squadron Mess, sir.'

Biggles stared at the speaker. He saw a slim, nervous-looking youth whose pale face was thin and pinched as though with hunger. His hair was short and crisply curled. It was soaking wet. Rain trickled down

his face and formed a dewdrop on the end of his nose.

Pale grey eyes regarded the C.O. steadily. Occasionally his jaws moved with a rolling motion.

The C.O. got up and held out his hand, rather awkwardly; he was wondering why a squadron with the reputation of Naval Eight 1 should have kept the hat. 'Glad to see you, Carrington,' he said. He glanced at the clock. 'Why are you late ?'

'I didn't know I was,' came the answer, promptly. 'Your clock is a minute fast.'

Biggles frowned. 'You're sure of that?'

Certain. 'I set my watch by H.Q. time this morning—and they get it from Greenwich.'

Biggles drew a deep breath. 'I'll take your word for it,' he said stiffly. 'I hope you'll like it here.'

'I reckon so,' nodded Carrington, casually, glancing round. 'One place is much the same as another to me,' he added.

Biggles swallowed. 'This is going to be a squadron with a reputation,' he said tersely. 'I hope you'll bear it in mind.'

'I reckon you won't let me forget it,' returned the other, almost defiantly. 'His jaws recommenced their rolling.'

'Forgive me for being personal, but are you eating something?' inquired Biggles, with studied politeness.

'No, just chewing.'

'Chewing what?'

Gum.'

'Do you always chew gum when you report to a new station ?' .

1 Service name for a famous coastal unit.

'This is only my second, so I can't say.'

Algy turned away so that his face could not be seen. He was finding it difficult to retain his composure.

Biggles picked up his pen. 'Christian name?' he asked. 'Tug.'

'I mean your real name.'

That's it – Tug.'

Biggles looked up. 'This is no time for pleasantries,' he announced crisply. 'What is your proper name?'

'I've told you twice – Tug.'

Biggles looked at his senior Flight Commander hopelessly. Then he shrugged his shoulders and turned his eyes to the new arrival. 'Is that what they call you at home?'

'It would be if I had a home.'

Biggles tried different tactics. 'I suppose we must blame your father for a name like that,'

he said cheerfully as he wrote it down.

'You might if he was alive – and if you were looking for trouble. My old man was pretty handy with his dukes.'

'Why did he give you a name like that?' asked Biggles, moved to curiosity in spite of himself.

'He was master of a Port of London tug for so long that he couldn't think of anything else. Or it may have been because I was born on a tug. Or perhaps because at the Ring they called me Young Tug.'

'The Ring?'

Blackfriars Ring.'

I see. So you're a professional pugilist?'

'If you mean boxer – yes. Flyweight.'

Biggles picked up his pen again. 'How many enemy aircraft have you shot down?'

'I dunno, sir.'

Why don't you know?'

'I've never bothered to count them, and that's a fact. Why trouble ? There's always plenty more.'

Again Biggles's eyes met Algy's. They were twinkling. 'It's a great thing to have a sense of humour,' he said softly. 'What's that ?' asked Tug.

'A sense of humour? Haven't you got one?'

Tug shook his head. 'Not that I know of.'

'I mean - to be able to see the funny side of things,' explained the C.O.

'Funny ?' There was frank incredulity in Tug's voice. 'Do you see something funny about this war, with women and kids —'

'No - no, of course not,' broke in Biggles quickly. 'All right, Carrington. You'll be attached to A Flight. This is Flight Lieutenant Lacey, your Flight Commander. Go with him and he'll introduce you to the mess. There will be no flying till the weather lifts.'

'Why not?'

'Why not?' The C.O. looked blank, then he frowned. 'Those are my orders,' he said shortly.

'I ought to have guessed that,' murmured Tug.

Biggles swallowed hard. He wanted to say what he was thinking, but he was anxious to avoid trouble with H.Q. at that particular moment. 'I'll give you a day or two to get the hang of things,' he promised.

'I shan't need 'em,' announced Tug simply. 'I'm ready as soon as you like. I came down here to shoot Huns, so the sooner I start in the better.'

'Yes, I think perhaps you're right,' returned Biggles, smiling in spite of himself. 'By the way, I noticed the way you landed your machine just now. It was a trifle irregular to say the least of it. I never like interfering with a fellow's flying, but machines are expensive, and hard to replace. I hope you'll bear that in mind.'

'What I handle, whether it's women, dogs, or planes, I handle rough; then there's no argument as to who's boss,' muttered Tug grimly. 'In the end we get on better that way.'

Biggles put his hand over his mouth so that his smile could not be seen. 'All right, Carrington. As you like. But if you go on flying as

you've started it's only a matter of time before you do the enemy a good turn by writing yourself off.'

That'll be my funeral, sir, won't it?'

Biggles gave it up. 'All right,' he said. 'That's all.'

Algy took Tug by the arm and ushered him out of the room. 'Come into the mess and have a drink,' he invited. Meaning booze?'

'Not necessarily, but we don't always drink cold water.' Tug laughed, a short harsh cackle like the sound made by an angry cockerel.

It was so unexpected that Algy started. 'What's the matter?' he asked sharply.

'Matter? Nothing - except if some of the blokes in this war would stop pouring booze down their necks we should get on faster.'

'I take it you have a rooted objection to alcohol?' remarked Algy, for the sake of saying something.

r 'I have.

'Why?'

'Because my old man used to flay the hide off me every time he got tight.'

'And how often was that?'

'Every night.'

Algy smiled faintly and said no more. He cast a sidelong glance at his companion, wondering how he was going to fit in with the others. He saw trouble ahead. Well, it takes all sorts to make a war,' he ruminated.

They found Bertie, Tex, and Ferocity in the anteroom, waiting for the weather to clear. Bertie was playing the piano and the others were singing, but the din subsided as Algy and the new man entered.

'This is Tug Carrington,' announced Algy. He has just been posted to us.'

Tug clasped his hands above his head and turned from side to side in a professional pugilistic fashion. 'Pleased to meet you, boys,' he said

seriously, amid a titter of laughter.

It was unfortunate that a hush should fall at the precise moment when Bertie remarked in a plaintive voice, 'Good heavens, what's this ?'

The hush deepened into an embarrassed silence. The smile faded from Tug's face as a ray of winter sunshine is blotted out by a cloud, and he began to move towards the chair in which Bertie was lolling. He did not walk in the usual way. He seemed to bounce slightly, as if his toes were springs. Reaching Bertie's chair he stopped, and there was something about the way he bristled that reminded Algy of an angry wire-haired terrier.

'Had that remark of yours anything to do with me ?' asked Tug quietly.

For a moment Bertie looked surprised. He screwed his eyeglass a little tighter into his eye. Then he smiled. 'My dear old top,' he murmured, 'don't tell me you're looking for trouble?'

'What else would I be doing here?' flashed Tug.

Algy butted in. 'All right, Tug; put your hackles down. Bertie didn't mean anything.'

Then he ought to keep his tongue under control,' snapped Tug. 'I don't take lip from anybody.'

Of course not. Let's leave it at that. Have a drink?'

"Thanks. I'll have a glass of milk with a dash of soda in it.'

Tug turned a coldly hostile eye over the faces that were smiling, and the smiles faded swiftly.

Algy sensed trouble. 'All right,' he said loudly, to relieve the tension. 'Let's —' He broke off short, his muscles stiffening, as a sound, rising and falling on the wind, became audible. One jump took him to the window, eyes turned upwards to the clouds. 'Look out! That sounds like

The rest of his words were lost in a crash as a chair hurtled across the room. Tug had flung it aside as he sped to the door. The others followed swiftly, but by the time they had reached the open Tug, hatless and minus anything in the way of flying kit, was sprinting towards his machine, still standing where he had left it on the

completion of his

'tarmac' landing. As he reached it, and took a flying leap into the cockpit, a Junkers dive bomber dropped out of the clouds overhead, the pilot flying busily, obviously seeking a target.

The whole thing had happened so quickly that Algy had barely time to grasp the facts.

He could only stare.

Biggles burst out of his office. What's going on?' he asked shortly. As he spoke he looked up, and there was no need for anyone to answer his question.

'Get ready to take cover everybody,' he snapped, and made a bee-line for the Bren gun that was mounted in front of the building.

His order was ignored. The officers joined him at the gun. All eyes were on Tug's Spitfire, now taking off cross-wind on one wheel, to what seemed certain destruction.

Biggles paled. 'He's mad. He'll kill himself!' he cried in a strangled voice.

On the face of it this was a safe prophecy, for the Spitfire was now swerving in a manner horrible to watch as it shot like a bullet towards the boundary hedge, which was so close that it seemed impossible that the machine could clear it. Biggles gripped Algy's arm like a vice as he waited for the crash.

At the last moment, when its destruction seemed assured, the Spitfire rocketed straight up under the Junkers. The enemy pilot, who by this time was taking a line on the aerodrome building, must have seen it coming, for instead of steepening his dive he pulled his nose up, and dipped a wing to get a better view of his assailant. He did not appear to be unduly worried; there was no reason why he should be, for every advantage, including height, was his.

Biggles was watching the Spitfire. It seemed to fascinate him. He could not understand why it remained in the air, for its pilot seemed to be defying the law of gravity.

'He'll stall that machine as sure as fate,' muttered Algy through dry lips, and then ducked as the wail of Bertie's hunting horn cut into the roar of engines.

`Yoicks ... Tally-Ho !' sang Bertie, clearly excited.

Shut up and put that thing away,' snapped Biggles, whose nerves were on edge. But his eyes never left the combat now taking shape overhead.

The Spitfire, for some reason not immediately apparent, did not stall. It hung for a moment on the point of it, however, its prop screaming as it clawed at the air, and the Junkers sailed in to strike the first blow. The pilot had every reason to hope that it would be the last, for the Spitfire presented an almost stationary target. His nose was nearly in line when the Spitfire levelled out to even keel, and at the same time spun on its longitudinal axis, a manoeuvre both unexpected and spectacular — at least, the Junkers'

pilot seemed to find it so, for he swerved away like a startled colt.

The Spitfire's nose dropped. For three seconds the engine roared as it gathered speed; then the machine soared skyward in a perfectly timed upward spin. It came out at the same level as the Junkers, with its nose in line. Simultaneously the grating roar Of its



*As straight as an arrow sped the Spitfire, straight towards the
Junkers*

eight guns blended with the moan of engines.

Pieces flew off the Junkers, which banked wildly and headed for the nearest cloud.

My hat! Did you ever see anything like that?' gasped Biggles.

'Look! Look!' cried Algy, his voice rising to shrillness.

The enemy pilot, obviously realizing that he had taken a bigger bite than he could comfortably chew, was now concentrating all his efforts on escape; and, indeed, for a few seconds it seemed likely that he would succeed. Strangely enough, Tug appeared to be in no hurry about his next move. He turned slowly to get a clearer view of his adversary; then, deliberately, he put his nose down in an almost vertical dive.

For a terrible moment Algy thought he had been hit, and was diving flat out into the ground, for it seemed certain that he must strike it. But at the last moment he pulled out, the rush of air flattening the grass under his wings; then he pulled up in a zoom that made the engine howl like a giant in agony, a zoom that brought a cry of delight to Bertie's lips. Like an arrow sped the Spitfire, straight towards the Junkers.

The German pilot saw it coming, and swung round to bring his guns to bear. But he was too late. Much too late. Indeed, it is doubtful whether, at the finish, he knew where the Spitfire was. The desperate manner in which he banked suggested this.

Tug, travelling vertically upwards, fired only a short burst from underneath. Then he was past. But the instant he was above his quarry he flattened out, turned like a flash of light, and, at point-blank range, brought his nose, streaming fire, slowly across the Junkers from prop.-boss to tail-skid. The effect was as though a band-saw was passing through it.

It broke in halves. One wing went up and tore off at the roots. The fuselage began to fall, slowly at first, but with swiftly increasing speed.

On the ground nobody spoke.

The Junkers's fuselage, minus wings, went into the ground just beyond the boundary hedge like a torpedo. There was a roar like a clap of thunder as its bombs exploded.

Tug cut his engine, side-slipped steeply to within a hundred feet of the ground, levelled out, turned into wind, and dropped the Spitfire as lightly as a feather on the turf, finishing his run within a score of paces of where the spellbound members of the squadron were watching.

Oh, pretty - pretty to watch,' breathed Bertie.

There was a faint murmur, like the rustle of autumn leaves, as the others allowed long-held breath to escape from their lungs. The face that Biggles turned to Algy was white and wore a curious expression, an expression that was something between relief and frank disbelief.

‘In all my experience I never saw anything quite like that,’ he said slowly. ‘Carrington’s flying may not be the sort taught at the best schools, but it works - yes, it certainly works.’

Tug climbed out of his machine and walked towards the mess. His manner was that of a workman going home from work. There was nothing either in his expression or behaviour to suggest that anything unusual had happened.

The others followed him in.

‘Nice work, Tug,’ said Biggles sincerely.

‘Thanks.’ Tug tossed the word over his shoulder like a piece of orange peel.

‘Have a drink?’ Biggles beckoned the mess waiter.

Tug nodded dispassionately. ‘Thanks,’ he said again. ‘I could do with a glass of barley water.’

He glanced suspiciously round the company - but nobody was smiling.

CHAPTER 3

THE ARRIVAL OF ANGUS

FLIGHT LIEUTENANT ANGUS MACKAIL was annoyed. In his big Highland heart he felt that he had reason to be, and the fact that he could do nothing about it was like petrol on an oil bomb. After shooting down six enemy aircraft (four of them in one week) he had made application for posting to a squadron stationed near his home town of Aberdeen. The reason he had given to support this application was that the C.O. of the unit concerned, one Donald Mackail, was his brother - which was true enough. But, unfortunately for Angus, his C.O., Ian McIntosh, knew Donald just as well as he knew Angus, and with shrewd judgment perceived that while apart Angus and Donald were good if irresponsible officers, if ever they came together anything might happen. For which reason he had turned down the

application.

Feeling that he had been badly treated, Angus had signified his disapproval, and at the same time discharged some of the steam of his wrath by performing over the aerodrome the sequence of aerobatics widely advertised in pre-war air displays as 'crazy flying', an event that had terminated abruptly when he knocked - accidentally be it said - one of the chimney-pots off the C.O.'s quarter.

It was unfortunate for Angus that a new Wing Commander should have chosen that moment to inspect the station,

particularly as he had that morning received a letter from the Air Ministry inviting him to dispose of unruly officers by posting them to a special squadron then being formed for the express purpose of instilling into them the rudiments of that desirable quality known as discipline.

The upshot of the affair was that Angus was posted; not, as he had hoped, to bonny Scotland, but to Kent, where the new unit, Number 666 Fighter Squadron, was located.

Of course, he knew nothing of the real purpose of the squadron, but he learned that it was commanded by a Squadron Leader named Bigglesworth, and this did nothing to allay his not unnatural irritation; for he felt that an officer with such a name might not, or would not, perceive his finer qualities.

His orders were that he was to fly his Spitfire down to the new squadron as soon as weather permitted, and this had for some days been in accord with his humour; but in the circumstances he felt that the sooner he shook the dust — or rather, the mud — of such an ungrateful squadron off his boots, the better, regardless of meteorological conditions.

He would, he decided, proceed forthwith to Rowlham, Kent, and report to the Squadron Leader with the curious name. His machine was wheeled out and the engine started.

Angus, clapping an old regimental glengarry on the back of his head, as was his habit, tore across the aerodrome into the air, where he found conditions worse than he expected. Still, by flying low he expected no difficulty in finding his way, so he struck off to the south, intending to pick up his landmarks after crossing the Thames.

Before ten minutes had passed he was regretting his hasty decision to

start, for visibility became so bad that he had to admit to himself that he had no idea of his position. Once he found a road that he thought he knew, only to overshoot it, and presently found himself racing over a bleak country-side that he could not remember seeing before.

However, more by luck than judgment he found the Thames, and sped on more hopefully.

For half an hour he tore round searching for some landmark that would give him his bearings, growing more and more angry at his own folly. Once he nearly collided with a row of poplars, and on another occasion almost took the roof off a cottage. It was the dark silhouette of a church tower flashing past his wing-tip that decided him to run no further risks, but to come down and make inquiries about his position on the ground.

`Losh, I've had enough of this,' he grunted, as he throttled back and side-slipped down into a pasture. It was a praiseworthy effort to land in extremely difficult conditions, and would have succeeded but for an unlooked-for circumstance.

Just as the machine was finishing its run a dark object 'appeared in the gloom ahead, an object which, at the last moment, he recognized for an animal of the bovine species.

Having no desire to collide with an unoffending cow — more for his own sake than that of the animal — he kicked out his foot and swerved violently. There was a shuddering jar as the undercarriage twisted under the excess strain, and the machine slid to a standstill flat on the bottom of its fuselage, like a toboggan at the end of its run.

`Nae sae quid,' he muttered savagely, looking round for the cause of the accident, and noting with surprise that the animal had not altered its position. This struck him as odd, and he gazed at it curiously, wondering what it was doing, for it was certainly moving.

Then he saw that it was tearing up clods of earth with its front teeth, occasionally kneeling to thrust at the ground with a pair of vicious-looking horns.



The ferocious-looking beast gave vent to a savage bellow

An unpleasant sinking feeling caught him in the pit of the stomach as he stared, now in alarm, at the ferocious-looking

beast, which, at that moment, as if to confirm his suspicions gave vent to a savage bellow. He felt the blood drain from his face as he recognized the creature for a bull —

and it was evidently not one of the passive variety, either.

Now Angus had many accomplishments, but bull-fighting was not among them, so he looked round in a panic for some haven of retreat; but all he could see was the enveloping misty rain. What lay outside his range of vision, and how far away he was from the nearest hedge, he had no idea. He remembered once reading in a book that the sound of the human voice will often quell the most savage beast, and it struck him that the moment was opportune to test the truth of this assertion. Never did an experiment fail more dismally. Hardly had he opened his lips when the bull, with a resentful bellow, charged.

The cockpit of an aeroplane is designed to stand many stresses and strains, but not the head-on charge of an infuriated bull. Angus was well aware of it. He knew only too well that the fabric that covered his fuselage could no more withstand the onslaught of the bull's horns than an egg can deflect the point of an automatic drill. Just what the result would be he did not wait to see, for as the bull loomed up like an express train on one side of the machine he evacuated it on the other.

It must, be admitted that Angus, in spite of his big athletic frame, disliked physical exertion. In particular he disliked running, a thing not uncommon amongst men who normally judge their speed in miles per minute rather than miles per hour. But on this occasion he covered the ground so fast that the turf seemed to fly under his feet. Where he was going he did not know, nor did he pause to speculate; his one idea at that moment was to put the greatest distance between himself and the bull in the shortest possible time.

The direction he chose might have been worse. On the other hand, it might have been better. Had he gone a little more to the right he would have found it necessary to run a good quarter of a mile before he reached the hedge that bounded the field. As it was, he ran only a hundred yards before coming to the boundary, which at that point took the form of a barn with a shallow but extremely slimy pond by the side of it. Such was his speed, however, that he saw onl(y the barn, and, the first indication he had of the presence of the pond was a clutching sensation round the ankles. This at once arrested th e progress of the lower part of his body with out affecting the upper part. The result was inevitable. He hurtled forward like a diver taking a header from a spring board.

He came up in a

panic, striking out madly,

thinking that

he was deep water; but finding that he could

stand — for the water was not more than

three feet deep he staggered to his feet and floundered to the far side. Having reached it he looked round for the bull, taking the opportunity of unwinding from his neck a festoon of water-weed. The animal was nowhere in sight, so after pondering the scene, gloomily for a moment or two while he recovered his breath, he made his way past the barn to what was obviously the farm-house. Standing amid a depressed-looking company of pigs and fowls he knocked on the door.

It was opened almost at once, somewhat to his surprise, by a very pretty girl of about eighteen, who eyed him with astonishment. When he made his predicament known he was invited inside and introduced to her mother, who was busy with a saucepan at a big old-fashioned range.

Within a short time he was sitting in front of the fire, draped in an old overcoat, watching his uniform being dried and dipping pieces of bread into a bowl of soup. He felt some qualms about his machine, but he did not feel inclined to investigate, for he hesitated to lay himself open to ridicule by telling his hostesses the details of his encounter with the bovine fury in the meadow.

How long he would have remained in the chair is a matter for conjecture, for the fire was warm and he felt disinclined to stir, but a knock on the door announced the arrival of what was to furnish the second half of his adventure that day. Had he been more observant he might have noted that the girl blushed slightly; but he was looking towards the door, so it was with distinct astonishment and dour disapproval that he observed the entrance of a dark, dapper, and undeniably good-looking pilot officer in Royal Air Force uniform.

The pilot officer, who was very young, stopped dead when he saw Angus; his brow grew dark with suspicion and he shot an inquiring glance at the girl, who hastened to explain the circumstances. It soon transpired that he was a French Canadian, and the girl's fiance; the explanation mollified him, but it was clear that he was by no means happy at finding another airman in what he regarded as his own particular retreat. Indeed, he made this so apparent that Angus felt embarrassed.

However, they entered into conversation, although this was not as

easy as it should have been, for the Canadian spoke better French than English, while Angus knew no French, and his English was not only impregnated with a Highland brogue, but was punctuated with words not found in the Oxford Dictionary. Still, Angus learned that his new acquaintance was named Armand, a name which, at his unit, had been naturalized first to Almond, and then to 'Nutty

It appeared that he, too, was in a rather difficult position. Three days previously, while waiting to be posted to a service squadron, he had, without permission left the depot in a borrowed aircraft on an unofficial visit to his fiancée. While enjoying her hospitality he had been caught by the bad weather. When the time had come for him to leave, flying was absolutely out of the question, so he had done the only thing he could do in the circumstances; he had rung up the depot and informed the irate Officer in charge that he had been compelled to make a forced landing, but would return as soon as possible. But when the weather did not improve he had been ordered back anyway. So, leaving his aircraft — a communication squadron Tiger-Moth — where he had landed it, which was in a field rather larger than the one Angus had chosen, he had started back to the depot by road. But finding the weather slightly better and likely to clear before nightfall, he had now returned to fetch the machine.

Angus, in turn, related how he had become lost in the rain, and had landed with disastrous results to his undercarriage. He was, he stated, on his way to 666 Squadron at Rawlham.

The Canadian crossed to the window to regard the weather, which was now certainly improving but was by no means settled.

'I will fly you to the squadron,' he declared.

Angus started. Like many pilots he had a curious antipathy to being flown by a stranger, and he said as much. But as the afternoon wore on, and Nutty's frown grew deeper, he began to understand the position. The Canadian, who was evidently of a jealous disposition, was loath to leave him there with his girl; yet he, Nutty, was expected back at the depot, and further delay might get him into more trouble than he was already in.

So, rather than cause any friction between the lovers, Angus began seriously to contemplate Nutty's suggestion.

The weather was still dull, with low clouds scudding across the sky at a height of only two or three hundred feet; but it had stopped raining,

and light patches in the clouds showed where the sun was trying to break through. In any case, Angus knew that he would soon have to let the squadron know where he was or they would be sending out search-parties to look for him, for his departure from the north would have been signalled. So, rather against his better judgment, he accepted Nutty's invitation. He thanked his hostesses for their hospitality, resumed his uniform, and accompanied his companion to a rather delapidated Tiger-Moth that stood dripping moisture in the corner of a long field.

When his eyes fell on the machine he instantly regretted his decision, but there was no going back. More than ever did he regret leaving the comfortable fireside when his pilot, who handled the joystick like a pump-handle, took off with a stone-cold engine in a steep climbing turn. A minute later the machine was swallowed up in the murk. The period immediately following was a nightmare that Angus could never afterwards recall without a shudder, for Nutty, quite lightheartedly, seemed to make a point of taking every possible risk that presented itself. It became more and more obvious that he was either a novice of little experience, or else he had become overconfident from long practice -

Angus wasn't sure which. However, he managed to get up through the clouds, when he at once set off on a course that Angus felt certain would never take them to Rawlham.

'Hi! You're going too far east!' he shouted in the pilot's ear. Nutty shrugged his shoulders expressively. 'Who flies - me or you?' he roared.

Angus's lips set in a straight line. 'This isn't going to be funny,' he told himself bitterly. '

The fool will unload me on the wrong side of the Channel if I don't watch him ' He could see Nutty's lips moving, as if he were singing to himself.

Angus's lips also moved - but he was not singing.

'Hi!' he shouted again presently. 'D'ye ken whaur you're going?'

The Canadian looked both hurt and surprised. Rawlham, you said, mon ami.'

'Yes, but you're going the wrong way. You're getting too far south.' Angus pointed desperately towards the north. Non . . . non, non,'

argued Nutty emphatically.

Angus's expression became grim. He felt like hitting the man on the head, but as there was no dual-control joystick in his cockpit there was nothing he could do except sit still and fume, deploring the folly that had led him into such a plight.

Meanwhile Nutty started to explore the sky in all directions, until not even Angus had the remotest idea of their position. But the Canadian evidently had some secret method of navigation, for he suddenly throttled back and, turning with a smile, pointed downwards.

Rawlham!' he called cheerfully.

Angus stared unbelievably, for he felt convinced that they were not within twenty miles of the place.

Nutty, without any more ado, jammed the joystick forward and roared earthward.

Angus turned white and clutched at the sides of the cockpit, prepared for the worst.

There was no altimeter in his cockpit, and it looked as if the pilot was going straight into the ground. To his infinite relief, not to say astonishment, the machine levelled out at about two hundred feet over an aerodrome. He breathed a deep sigh of relief, for he was prepared to land anywhere, and be thankful for the opportunity.

It was nearly dark when the machine touched its wheels on the wet turf near the edge of the aerodrome. In fact, they were rather too near it, for the Moth finished its run with its nose in a ditch and its tail cocked high in the air.

Angus got out of the machine almost as quickly as he had left his Spitfire when the bull had charged it; but as soon as he was clear he surveyed the crash dispassionately. He was still

gazing at it when his attention was suddenly attracted by the curious antics of his companion. With a loud cry of horror he had leapt to the ground and was fumbling with a revolver. For a moment Angus did not understand, and his first impression was that the unhappy pilot was going to shoot himself in a fit of remorse for having crashed his machine. But then he saw that he was mistaken.

Losh, mon, what ails ye ?' he inquired coldly.

'Voila!' Nutty pointed, and following the outstretched finger, Angus turned stiff with shock. Dimly through the darkening mist, not fifty yards away, stood an aeroplane. It did not need a black cross on the side of its fuselage to establish its identity. The machine, beyond all doubt and question, was a Heinkel.

Angus turned to his companion in white-hot fury. 'You fush-faced fool,' he snarled. I said ye were off your course. You've landed us in France. These are Germans.'

Nutty paid no attention. With praiseworthy alacrity he was performing the last rites over his machine. He raised the revolver, and at point-blank range sent a shot into the petrol-tank. A tongue of flame sprang out, and within a minute the machine was a blazing inferno.

Then, side by side, they ran for their lives. There were shouts behind them, but they did not stop. They ran until they reached a wood, into which they plunged, gasping for breath, and then paused to consider the position. It was just about as unpleasant as it could be. The place was dripping with moisture and it was bitterly cold. Angus's teeth were already chattering, for his uniform had been by no means dry when he had put it on at the farm-house. There was nothing they could do about it, so they pressed on into the heart of the wood, where they crouched until it was pitch dark, hardly speaking a word.

Angus was still livid with rage. His companion apologized profusely, and declared in a hollow voice that he was 'desolated'. Finally, moved by a common impulse, they returned to the edge of the wood and found themselves in a narrow lane.

Suddenly Nutty started. He clutched Angus by the arm. 'The Heinkel,' he muttered. We will capture it. I will yet fly you to Rawlham!'

Angus uttered a low, hoarse laugh. 'Ye will, ha? Not on your life. Ye're not flying me anywhere.'

Nevertheless, there seemed to be something in Nutty's idea, and he regarded him with a new respect. He had no intention of letting him fly him to Rawlham — or anywhere else for that matter; but if they could manage to get hold of the machine they might yet escape. He might even reach the squadron that night.

Come on, we may as well try it,' he announced presently.

They set off in the direction of the aerodrome. It was nervy work, and

more than once they had to crouch shivering in the bottom of a ditch or in soaking undergrowth, while unseen pedestrians passed them in the darkness.

With the stealth of Red Indians on the warpath they crept towards their objective. In his heart Angus felt certain that by this time the machine would have been put in a hangar, from which it would be impossible to extract it without attracting attention. If that were so, then it would be the end of things.

As they slowly neared the spot where they had last seen the German aircraft, a low murmur of voices reached them from the direction of Nutty's crashed Moth, and once Angus thought he heard a laugh. The crash, it seemed, was amusing. He consoled himself with the thought that had the position been reversed he himself might have laughed; as it was, he did not try to raise a smile.

Hoping all the officers of the German squadron had collected round the crash, they made a wide detour to avoid it, and presently came upon the Heinkel almost in the same position as they had last seen it. What was more important, not a soul was in sight.

Now that the moment for action had arrived, Angus felt curiously calm; his companion, on the other hand, was fairly panting with excitement.

'You stay here while I get in the cockpit and start up.' 'Not on your life,' declared Angus warmly. 'If anyone is going to fly that machine it's me.'

Nutty was inclined to argue, but Angus showed his teeth and clenched his fists. This had the desired result. He was about to climb into the machine when from somewhere near at hand appeared a mongrel terrier, bristling and growling in his throat. A voice spoke. At the same time a head appeared above the edge of the cockpit.

There was no doubt about it. A man was sitting in the machine. As the awful truth burst upon him a groan broke from Nutty's lips.

Then the voice spoke again, loudly. It was not so much what it said, or the tone of the voice, that struck Angus all of a heap. It was the language used. It was English; nicely polished Oxford English, with a slight lisp.

'Here, I say, what the dickens do you fellers think you're playing at?' inquired the occupant of the machine as he jumped to the ground.

Angus's jaw sagged as he stared at a Royal Air Force uniform, with the rings of a Flight Lieutenant. His hands made idiotic signs in the air.

'Who — who are you ?' he gasped.

Lord Bertie Lissie smiled wanly. 'Me? I'm Lissie — yes, absolutely.'

Angus began to shake. 'But what's this kite doing here?' he demanded, pointing to the Heinkel.

Bertie considered the aircraft with a melancholy expression. 'I persuaded it to land this morning, after a bit of an argument — if you see what I mean.'

'Then this is — a British aerodrome?' queried Angus in a stunned voice.

For a moment Bertie looked alarmed. 'By Jove! I should jolly well hope so.' He turned to Nutty. 'You're not by any chance the silly ass who landed here about an hour ago and set fire to his machine ?'

But Nutty was not listening. He had sunk down on to the wheel of the Heinkel and buried his face in his hands.

Bertie was regarding him sympathetically when a number of other officers hurried up, headed by a Squadron Leader.

'What's going on here ?' he demanded.

Angus stood up, looking dazed, and announced himself. 'I was on my way to 666

Squadron, sir, when I ran into bad weather,' he explained.

The Squadron Leader held out his hand. 'We're glad to have you. I'm Squadron Leader Bigglesworth. As a matter of fact we were just wondering what had become of you.'

Biggles turned to Nutty Armand. 'Who's this ?'

Nutty managed to blurt out his name and rank.

'Why, that's splendid,' declared Biggles. 'We didn't expect you until tomorrow.'

'Expect me?' stammered Nutty.

Biggles was walking towards the mess. He glanced back over his shoulder. 'Yes — but of course, you've been absent without leave so perhaps you didn't know? You were posted to 666 Squadron with effect from tomorrow morning. Come on everybody, let's get inside out of the rain.'

CHAPTER 4

TAFFY TRUNDLES IN

HAVING dealt with the morning mail, Biggles tossed the letters into a filing basket and rang the bell for it to be taken away.

'I see there's a new posting,' he told Toddy, the station Adjutant.

'That's right, sir,' agreed Toddy. 'That will bring us up to strength. You saw the note from Wing saying that a spare pilot would also be sent along in the near future?'

Biggles nodded. 'Thank goodness we're getting things straightened out at last,' he remarked, with relief in his voice.

shall never hold this squadron together if they go on keeping us in reserve. Everyone's aching to get into the air and have a crack at these raiders, and I'm afraid if we're kept back much longer we shall need new machines before we can put a full squadron up.

Carrington, in particular, is getting restive. By the way, this fellow Hughes who is due to report — do you know anything about him?'

A slight cough from the direction of the door brought him round to see Flight Lieutenant Lord Bertie Lissie, in charge of B Flight, standing at the threshold.

'Did you say Hughes, sir?' murmured Bertie, screwing his monocle a little more tightly in his eye.

'Yes.' 'Not Taffy Hughes the Buster?'

Biggles picked up the posting slip. 'Flying Officer J. W. Hughes, of Aberystwyth.'

Bertie's face softened. 'Yes, that's Taffy the Buster,' he purred, and there was a curious note of affection in his voice.

Biggles frowned. 'Buster ? That sounds ominous. How did he get that

name ?' he asked suspiciously.

Bertie smiled apologetically. 'Well, as a matter of fact, sir, he has a curious knack of busting things – not that it's always his fault – if you see what I mean?'

'What sort of things does he bust?'

'He bust four Dornier 17's one afternoon – we were playing rugger at the time.'

'What do you mean? How the devil could he knock down four Huns while he was playing rugger?'

Bertie fingered his wisp of a moustache. 'We were playing the archie battery – on the aerodrome —'

'We? Were you in this too?'

Bertie coughed. 'Yes, I'm afraid so – absolutely.' 'Go on.'

'Well, the game was just-warming up when a party of jolly old Huns had the nerve to come over and throw things down on us. At first Taffy wouldn't stop the game, which was quite right, but when the Huns started machine-gunning us it distracted the spectators' attention, and then he got frightfully annoyed. By Jove he did! You should have seen him spit at them.'

Biggles stared. 'Spit! What was the use of that?'

'I explain myself badly,' returned Bertie sorrowfully. 'Taffy always spits, spits like a cat, when he gets worked up. Without waiting to change his shirt and shorts, he jumped into the nearest Spitfire and went upstairs like a lamplighter.'

He got four. Jolly good show, don't you think?' Bertie's eyes brightened at the recollection.

We can do with a few fellows like that,' declared Biggles.

'Unfortunately, he didn't only bust the Dorniers,' murmured Bertie, in melancholy tones.

He bust a hole through the mess.'

What with?'

À lorry. You see, he was shot down himself by a Messerschmitt 109, and borrowed a lorry to get home so that we could finish the game before dark; but when he got to the mess it seems that the brakes wouldn't work - beastly nuisance.'

The suspicious look in Biggles's eyes deepened. Go on -what else did he bust ?'

Bertie stroked his chin and gazed at the ceiling reminiscently. 'He bust a roundabout one day, I remember - it was his own. He'd bought it.'

`What in the name of heaven would he want with a thing like that ?'

Ìt all came through an argument in the mess as to how fast it would rev. up. Poor old Taffy decided to find out - and you'd be surprised how fast it went when he gave her full throttle.'

It must have been rather fun.'

Ì know,' said Bertie earnestly, that's what we all thought. We couldn't understand why the people who were on it made such a fuss.'

Biggles started. You mean - there were people on it at the time ?'

We forgot to tell them to get off,' explained Bertie. `Not that they stayed on very long -

centrifugal force, and all that - if you see what I mean ?'

`Yes,' said Biggles slowly. 'I see what you mean. I begin to understand why he's been posted to me. You've given me an idea of what to expect. All right. Carry on with machine-gun practice until Hughes arrives; then maybe we'll do a little squadron formation practice.'

Bertie saluted and withdrew.

Biggles picked up his cane and set off on a tour of inspection. 'Let me know when Hughes arrives,' he told Toddy. `Something may have delayed him.'

Biggles spoke more truly than he knew. Something had delayed Taffy. Something always did. In this case it was a formation of enemy bombers. Of course, being on his way to a new unit he need not have engaged them; nor, indeed, would he have seen them had he carried out his orders and flown direct from his station to Kent. But Taffy's idea of a direct flight between two points was via the Thames Estuary.

Even then there was really no excuse for him to fly as high as twenty-five thousand feet.

The truth of the matter was that the alert had sounded, and he knew it, so the temptation to go round by the Estuary -just to have a look - was too great to be resisted.

At first, to his intense disappointment, no aircraft were to be seen, and as he surveyed the dome of lapis lazuli a look of gloom settled in his dark Celtic eyes. He was not to know that the enemy formation had been intercepted, broken up, and turned back, nearer to London, so that he was, in fact, between them and the coast. Still hoping, he continued on towards the Channel, cruising in the direction of the French coast.

He turned, and was just about to glide back towards his distant destination when the affair developed on such ideal lines that he could not have arranged things better. Out of the haze appeared two Junkers, flying close together; they were about five thousand feet below him, and looked like two dirty fish swimming in a bowl of milky liquid. The pilots were gliding towards their own territory, and it is doubtful if they even saw the British machine which moved quickly into the sun.

Taffy knew instinctively what had happened; realized that the enemy formation had been broken and that the pilots were now making their way home independently. He felt almost sorry for the unsuspecting pilots below him as he stood his Spitfire on its nose and roared down on them. He took the nearest one first, and held his fire until the last moment. The Junkers broke up instantly, as if it had been struck by one of its own bombs. The other pilot turned to fight, saw the Spitfire, changed his mind, and made the understandable but fatal blunder of diving for home. Taffy, as if he had divined what the German would do, cut him off, zoomed into the sun, dived, came up underneath, and laced the fat fuselage with bullets. The machine turned slowly over on its back and plunged downwards towards the sea.

Taffy returned to his original height and course. His, eyes were sparkling. Another enemy machine appeared, a Messerschmitt 109 this time, cruising confidently now that it was so near home; but a movement evidently caught the pilot's eye, for he looked up.

He saw the Spitfire at once and acted with the speed of light. Flinging his machine into a spin, he sought safety nearer the water. Death followed him down. There was a brief battle just above the water, a

cloud of spray, and the Messerschmitt disappeared from view.

Taffy turned away and looked up, realizing that he was now dangerously low. He could hardly believe his eyes when they picked up a straggling part of five Heinkel fighters less than a mile away, and flying at under a thousand feet. It was obvious from the loose formation in which they flew that they had not thought of danger. Their eyes may have been on the

French coast, for he was amazed at the calm way they went on flying even while he was racing towards them.

He picked out the rear man, and one short burst set his machine on fire. This, he felt, was a satisfactory performance, and he had reason to hope that he would be able to repeat it; but it was not to be. The leading pilot must have looked back, and in another moment the four machines were tearing back over their course, with Taffy heading for home at full throttle. In the ordinary way four machines would not have intimidated him, but, rash though he was, he was no fool; he was too near German-occupied France for safety, and there was a chance of more machines arriving to cut him off. Moreover, his ammunition was running low. On the way home he met another straggler and gave it a short burst, but had no time to reconnoitre the result. With the four enemy machines close behind, close enough to fire at him, he sped towards the white cliffs behind which lay safety.

He reached them, and looked back to see the Heinkels making for home hotly pursued by archie from the shore batteries. Narrowly missing a barrage balloon, he climbed to two thousand feet and then set a course for his new station. Glancing at his watch, he saw with surprise, but without dismay, that he was likely to arrive late.

He was aroused from the reverie into which he had sunk by a sudden vibration of the engine, and looked sharply at his rev. counter to see the needle falling back, although from what cause he did not know. Possibly a bullet had hit his engine, he thought vaguely, hoping that it would last out until he reached the aerodrome. In this, however, he was doomed to disappointment, finally being forced to land in a convenient field about half a mile short of it. It was irritating to get so close and then have to make a forced landing, but he was used to that sort of thing.

The Spitfire, thanks to its flaps, finished its run about twenty yards short of a hedge which bordered the road at that particular spot, and near to where some Tommies were standing by a vehicle which, as

Taffy climbed the gate, revealed itself to be a tank. He sat on the gate, watching it for a moment or two while he recovered his composure, and in so doing discovered that he was thirsty.

'Have any of you fellows got anything in your water-bottles ?' he asked the crew of the tank.

Yes, sir,' came a chorus of replies.

He accepted the first water-bottle, and having refreshed himself, got off the gate, telling himself that he would have to get on.

What are you doing?' he asked the corporal in charge of the party.

'We've had a bit of a breakdown, sir,' returned the N.C.O.

Taffy considered the ponderous vehicle curiously, for he had never before had an opportunity of examining one.

'I'd hate to be shut up in that thing, look you,' he murmured.

'Oh, it's not so bad,' answered the corporal. 'Have a look. She stinks a bit, but that's all.'

Taffy crawled through the steel trap. 'Phew, I should say she does stink,' he remarked.

You soon get used to it,' smiled the corporal.

'And this is where the driver sits ?' went on Taffy, dropping into the seat behind the wheel and peering through the letterbox slit that permitted a restricted view ahead.

That's it, sir,' agreed the corporal. 'Excuse me, sir,' he went on, as one of the men outside called something.

Taffy was so interested that he did not notice his departure. He thumbed the controls gingerly. 'I'd sooner have my own cockpit than this,' he declared, and started to vacate the seat.

Just what he put his foot on he did not know. He never did know. But there was a violent explosion, and the machine jerked forward with a jolt that caused him to strike his head on a metal object behind him. At the same time the trap slammed shut with a clang.

Slightly dazed, Taffy fell into the driving seat. It was sheer instinct that made him clutch at the wheel and swing it round just as the front

of the vehicle was about to take a tree head-on, but he managed to clear it and get back on the road, down which the tank proceeded to charge at a speed that seemed utterly impossible for such a weight.

`Hi! Corporal!' he shouted. 'Come and stop the confounded thing. I can't.'

There was no reply.

Snatching a quick glance over his shoulder, he saw to his horror that the corporal was not there. In fact, the machine was empty.

`Gosh, I'm sunk!' he muttered, white-faced.

Fortunately the road was straight, but even so it was only with difficulty that he was able to keep the tank on it, for the wheel vibrated horribly, and the steering-gear seemed to do strange things on its own account. He eyed a distant bend in the road apprehensively.

'That's where we pile up,' he thought. 'I shall never make that turn. I must have been daft to get into this devil's go-cart.'

He made a quick reconnaissance of the controls, and selected one which he felt ought to be the throttle. 'Whoa mare,' he murmured, and pulled it back.

The machine leapt forward like a greyhound leaving a trap, and again Taffy's head came into violent contact with the metal object behind him. He fell forward and struck his nose on another metal object. The noise, which had been bad enough before, became unbearable.

`Hi! Let me out!' he yelled.

The bend in the road lurched sickeningly towards him, and, as he had prophesied, he failed to make it. He clutched at the side of the tank as it struck the bank and buried itself in the hedge. But he had forgotten the peculiar properties of this particular type of vehicle. Regarded as obstructions, the bank, the ditch, and the hedge were so trivial that the machine did not appear to notice them. There was a slithering scream as the caterpillar wheels got a grip on the bank, and then, with a lurch like a sinking ship, it was over.

The lurch flung Taffy back into his seat, and he looked through the slit to see what lay ahead. A moan of despair broke from his lips when he saw that he was on the aerodrome, heading straight for the sheds. He

snatched at the nearest lever, but it had no effect on the vehicle's progress. He pulled and pushed everything within reach, but it still made no difference. In sheer desperation he clawed at the wheel, hoping to clear the hangars.

'Look out, look you!' he bellowed, but his words were lost in the din.

The airmen who happened to be on duty needed no warning. As one man they rushed out of the hangar and, after a glance at the horror bearing down on them, fled incontinently.

Taffy saw a car, an ancient Morris - it was Lissie's, although, of course, he was not to know that - directly in his path. He hung on to the wheel, but it was no use. The tank, which had seemed to be more than willing to turn when he was on the road, now refused to answer the controls in the slightest degree. It took the car in its stride, so to speak, and in a second ended its useful life in a cloud of splinters and bent metal. Beyond it loomed the hangar. Lissie rushed out, took one look at the mangled remains of the car, and appeared to go mad.

'Stand clear - I can't stop,' bawled Taffy through the letterbox opening.

Whether the Flight Commander heard or not Taffy did not know; but the Flight Commander leapt for his life at the last moment. The tank roared past him into the hangar.

Where a bank and a hedge had failed to have any effect it was not to be expected that a mere flimsy canvas hangar could stop it, and Taffy burst out of the far side like an express train coming out of a tunnel, leaving the hangar looking as if a tornado had struck it.

A mechanic who was having a quiet doze at the back of it had the narrowest escape of his life. He woke abruptly, sat up wondering as the din reached his ears, and then leapt like a frog as he saw death burst through the structure behind him. The tank's caterpillar wheels missed him by inches, and Taffy mentally awarded him the world's record for the standing jump.

A party of airmen were under instruction in the concrete machine-gun pit a little farther on. They heard the noise, but, mistaking it for a low-flying formation of planes, they did not immediately look round. They did so, however, as the steel monster plunged into the pit, and how they managed to escape being crushed to pulp must always remain a mystery. But the concrete pit was a tougher proposition than the tank had before encountered and it gave it best. With a loud hiss it gave a final convulsive lurch, and then lay silent.

Taffy picked himself up from the floor and felt himself gingerly to see if any bones were broken. A noise of shouting came from outside, which did not surprise him, so he crawled to the door and tried to unfasten it; but it refused to budge.

A strong smell of petrol reached his nostrils, and in something like a panic he hurled himself against the door, just as it was opened from the outside. He took a flying header into

the turf. Blinking like an owl, with oil and perspiration running down his face, he sat up and looked about him stupidly.

Facing him, regarding him grimly, was a Squadron Leader. In a little group behind him were more officers, who had rushed out of the mess when they heard the crash.

Taffy pulled himself together, and facing the C.O. announced, 'I'm reporting for duty, sir.'

Biggles nodded. 'I noticed it.'

Taffy felt that some explanation was needed. He indicated the tank. 'She got away with me, sir. If you ask my opinion they make these things too heavy on the controls.'

The C.O. regarded him stonily. 'I'm not asking your opinion,' he said softly. 'Your name, I fancy, is Hughes?'

Taffy looked puzzled. 'That's right, sir. How did you guess?'

Biggles's lips parted in a mirthless smile. 'I didn't guess,' he said with deadly sarcasm. 'I knew.'

CHAPTER 5

ONE GOOD TURN

WHEN he took off on a short test flight, Ginger Hebblethwaite had no intention of landing at Dewton, the home of Number 701 (Hurricane) Squadron; but after wandering about in the blue for some time, and finding himself within gliding distance of Dewton, he decided to drop in and leave his card at the mess.

In accordance with custom, an old custom which the Higher Command has not quite succeeded in abolishing, he did not land immediately. For the honour and glory of the squadron to which he

belonged he first treated any casual spectators of his arrival to a short exhibition in the art of aerobatics. He pushed his nose down and roared low over the mess, so low that his wheels almost touched the roof, in order to indicate that the show was about to commence.

Thereafter, at various altitudes, he proceeded to put his: machinethrough every evolution known to aviation. Loops,. 'low rolls, half rolls, rolls on the top of loops, upward spins,.

Sad whip-stalls followed each other in quick succession until,. feeling slightly giddy, he decided that he had done enough. He cut his engine, glided between the hangars in a manner that scattered his audience, and then skidded round to a neat tarmac landing.

Satisfied that he had upheld the traditions of 666 Squadron, he leapt lightly to the ground, and with a_

smile on his face advanced towards the members of the Hurricane squadron.

One stood a little apart from the others, and, observing his expression, Ginger's face lost something of its gaiety and acquired a faint look of anxiety.

The isolated officer, who Ginger now saw wore on his arm the rings of a Flight Lieutenant, took a pace towards him. 'Who are you?' he barked, in such a peremptory voice that

Ginger jumped. The greeting was unusual, to say the least. 'Why - er - I'm Hebblethwaite of 666,' replied Ginger. 'Say "sir" when you speak to me! I am in command here during the temporary absence of Squadron Leader Wilkinson.' 'Sorry, sir,' replied Ginger, abashed and astonished. 'What do you mean by acting like a madman over my aerodrome ?'

Ginger blinked and looked helplessly at the other officers. 'Not like a madman, sir, I hope.'

'Don't argue with me! I say your flying is outrageous - a wanton risk of government property.'

'But I —'

Silence ! Consider yourself under open arrest. Report your name and unit to the Duty Officer and then return instantly to your own

squadron. I shall refer the matter to Wing Headquarters. You will hear further from your C.O.'

Ginger stiffened and swallowed hard.

'Very good, sir,' he muttered between clenched teeth.

He saluted briskly, reported to the Squadron office, and then returned to the tarmac.

Several officers regarded him sympathetically. One of them winked and inclined his head.

Ginger halted near him. 'What's the name of that Dismal Desmond ?' he asked softly. '

What's biting him, anyway? Has he had a shock of some sort, or is it just plain nasty-mindedness?'

reckon he was just born like it,' murmured the other. 'They must have fed him on crabapples when he was a kid. Watch out, though - he's acting C.O.'

'What's his name ?'

'Bitmore.'

'Then he's bit a bit more than he can chew this time,' punned Ginger viciously. 'How many Huns has he got?' 'None that I know of.'

'Then how did he get those rings on his sleeve?'

'Chasing pupils round the tarmac at a flying training school.'

'Well, this isn't one and he isn't chasing me,' snapped Ginger. 'My crowd'll show him where he steps off if he's going to try this sort of stuff. Give your blokes my con-dolences. Cheerio.'

'Cheer-oh, laddie.'

Ginger climbed into his machine, took off, and raced back to Rawlham. He parked his Spitfire in its usual place and marched stiffly towards the Squadron Office. On the way he met a party of officers, including Algy Lacey, his Flight Commander, and Lord Bertie Lissie, in charge of B Flight.

'Stand aside,' he requested curtly as they moved to intercept him. 'I'm

under arrest.'

Algy stopped\ dead. 'You're what?' he gasped.

Under arrest'

Arrest my foot! What's the game?'

'No game - it's a fact. I dropped in on 701 Squadron this morning, the Hurricane crowd over at Dewton, and gave them the once-over before I landed. When I got down, a cross-grained skunk named Bitmore, who, apparently, is acting C.O., ticked me off properly and put me under open arrest.'

'Your show must have given: him a rush of blood to the brain.'

'Looks that way. Anyhow, he's reporting me to Wing.'

Algy frowned and looked at Bertie. 'The fellow must be a scallywag,' he muttered. 'What are we going to do about it? We can't have blighters like this throwing their weight about; life won't be worth living. Think of what the poor chaps in his own squadron must go through. Quite apart from Ginger, I think we ought to do something for them.'

Bertie fingered his wisp of moustache. 'Absolutely,' he declared. 'Absolutely.'

I tell you what,' went on Algy, and drawing Bertie to one side he whispered in his ear.

Then he turned again to Ginger.

All right, laddie,' he said, 'you'd better go and report to Toddy. You've had orders, and if you don't obey them it'll only make things worse.'

Ginger departed in the direction of the Squadron Office, while Algy and Bertie walked quickly back towards their quarters.

Some time later two Spitfires appeared over the boundary of the Hurricane aerodrome at Dewton; and to the officers lounging in front of the mess it was at once apparent that neither of the pilots was adept in the art of flying. Twice they circled the aerodrome, making flat turns and generally committing those faults that turn the hair of an instructor prematurely grey. Twice they attempted to land. The first time they undershot, and opening up their engines at the last

moment, narrowly escaped disaster as they staggered across the front of the sheds.

The second time they overshot hopelessly and, skimming the trees on the far side of the aerodrome, skidded round to a down-wind landing. The spectators wiped the perspiration from their faces, while the ambulance raced round trying to judge the exact spot on which the crash would occur.

The first of the two machines made its third attempt to get in, and a cry of horror arose as the Spitfire drifted along on a course dead in line with the wind-stocking pole. At the last moment the pilot appeared to see it, swerved, missed it by an inch, and flopped down in a landing that would have disgraced a first-soloist. The second machine followed, grazing the mess roof. Together they taxied an erratic course to the hangars.

Two pilots, clad in brand new flying kit and crash-helmets, climbed out of the machines and walked towards the little crowd of officers and airmen who had gathered for the fun.

Slightly in front of them Flight Lieutenant Bitmore stood waiting. He was obviously in his element. Anger and disgust were predominant on his face.

Come here,' he snarled.

Obediently the two officers altered their course towards him.

What sort of an exhibition do you call that?' greeted Bitmore, his lips curling in a sneer.

'Do you call yourselves pilots ?' He appeared to choke for a moment, and then went on: '

You're not fit to pilot a perambulator down a promenade, either of you. A steam-roller driver would have put up a better show. I've never seen such an exhibition of supreme inability in my life. You make me —'

His voice trailed away to a silence that could be felt as the nearer of the two recipients of his invective slowly unfastened his flying kit, disclosing the uniform of an Air Commodore. The other had followed his example, and stood arrayed as a Wing Commander.

The Air Commodore eyed the Flight Lieutenant speculatively. 'Have

you quite finished?

'he inquired in a voice that made the spectators shiver. 'Because, if you have, I will begin. What is your name?'

Bitmore, sir.'

`Bitmore ? Ha, I might have known it. I've heard of yip Who is in command at this station?'

There was a titter from the assembled officers, but it faded swiftly as the Air Commodore's eyes flashed on them.

Ì – I am, sir, temporarily,' stammered Bitmore.

`You! You tell me that you are in command of this squadron! How dare you take it upon yourself to criticize my flying. How long have you been in command?'

Well, sir —'

The Air Commodore thrust his chin forward. 'Don't "well" me – answer my question.'

`Two days, sir.'

Àha! Two days, eh? And you think that qualifies you to criticize officers who have learnt their flying in the field? called here for petrol, and this is the reception I get.'

Ì'm sorry, sir.'

`You will be – yes, you will be, I promise you. Get my tanks filled up and have both these machines craned. Come along, jump to it. We've no time to waste.'

Bitmore, pale and trembling, lost no time in obeying the order; and the airmen needed no urging. They set about the machines, and in ten minutes the two Spitfires were refuelled.

Half an hour later they looked as if they had only just left the workshops of the makers, but not until they were completely satisfied did the Air Commodore and his aide-de-camp climb into their seats.

Ì shall bear your name in mind,' was the Air Commodore's parting shot at Bitmore, as he taxied out and took of

A quarter of an hour later both machines landed at Rawl-ham. The two pilots leapt to the ground and, to the great surprise of Flight Sergeant Smyth, ran round the back of the hangars to the officers' quarters. It struck the Flight Sergeant, from their actions as they ran, that they were both in pain.

They were; but not until they were in Algy's room and had discarded their borrowed raiment did the pseudo senior officers give way to their feelings. Algy lay on his bed and sobbed helplessly. Bertie, with the Wing Commander's tunic on the floor at his feet, sat on the bed with his face buried in his hands, making a peculiar gurgling noise.

'Poor blighter,' said Algy at last, wiping his face with a towel. 'He'll never be able to live that down as long as he lives. Right in front of the whole blinking squadron, too. Still, it served him right. He asked for it.'

By Jove ! If ever he finds out won't there be a lovely stink –if you see what I mean,'

chuckled Bertie, polishing his monocle.

But nothing happened, and by the next evening the incident was half forgotten.

Two days later a middle-aged officer, with a double row of medal ribbons on his breast, landed in a Hurricane at Rawl-ham and briskly towards the Squadron Office.

Biggles, who was working at his desk, looked up as the visitor entered. Instantly his face broke into a smile of welcome, and he sprang to "AS feet.

'Why, if it isn't Wilks!' he cried delightedly. 'You've got yourself back in harness again I see. Well, this is a surprise. What brings you here? Where are you stationed?'

Squadron Leader Wilkinson, D.S.O., shook hands warmly. 'I've just been given a new squadron – 701 – Hurricanes,' he announced. 'We're at Dewton, just over the way, so I hope we shall be seeing something of each other. I've been on a few days' leave – had to leave the squadron in charge of Bit-more, my senior Flight Lieutenant. I've got a fine lot of chaps so I hope we shall do Well.'

'Good – I hope you will. All the same, I reckon my Spitfires will get more than your Hurricanes.'

Squadron Leader Wilkinson, better known in the Service as 'Wilks', laughed. 'Yes, it looks as if we're going to have our old Camels versus S.E.5's competitions again. But that isn't why I came to see you. A couple of days ago my squadron had a visit from two Air Ministry officers, an Air Commodore and a Wing Commander - awful nuisance, these people. When I came back I made some inquiries about it, and ran into Air Vice-Marshall Logan. He happened to mention to me that he was going to make a surprise inspection of your station some time today, so I thought I'd give you the tip.'

Biggles sprang to his feet. 'The dickens he is!' he cried. 'Thanks very much, Was. Dash these people and their surprise visits. They seem to think we've nothing else to do but sit and polish our machines.'

Wilks nodded sympathetically. 'Well, I shall have to be getting back - no, I can't stay to lunch. I'm very busy at the moment - thanks all the same.'

'I shall have to get busy myself to put things in order for this inspection,' replied Biggles seriously. 'Cheer-oh, old boy, and thanks for giving me the tip. I hope we shall be seeing you again soon.'

'You certainly will,' answered Wilks, with a curious expression on his face.

Biggles lost no time in setting preparations on foot for the impending inspection.

Telephones rang, N.C.O.s chased airmen to various tasks, and all officers were ordered out of the mess to help clean their machines.

For two hours the aerodrome presented a scene of unparalleled activity, and by the end of that time everything was in apple-pie order. All ranks were then dismissed to their quarters with orders to parade in twenty minutes, properly dressed for inspection in their best uniforms.

'Stand by until further orders,' announced Biggles after he had carried out a thorough inspection of everything and everyone on the station.

An hour passed slowly, and nothing happened. Two hours passed, and still there was no sign of the Air Vice-Marshall.

Biggles began to fidget. 'This is a bit thick,' he muttered irritably. 'It must be after lunch time - we don't look like getting any. If I dismiss

everybody you can bet your life that will be the moment the Air Vice-Marshall will arrive.' He was speaking to his Flight Commanders.

Slowly the afternoon wore on, but still there was no sign of the expected officer. Then, from a distance, came the drone of many aeroplanes flying in formation, and the personnel of the waiting squadron stiffened expectantly.

A puzzled expression came over Biggies's face. 'What's all this?' he murmured wonderingly. 'If this is the Air Vice-Marshall, then he's —' He broke off, staring at the far side of the aerodrome as nine Hurricanes, flying low and in a beautiful tight vee formation, swept into sight.

Straight across the aerodrome they roared. When they were -about half-way, and immediately in front of the officers' mess, they dipped in ironical salute. A message bag fluttered to the ground from the leading machine. Then they disappeared from sight beyond the hangars, and the drone of their engines faded in the distance.

A sergeant ran out, picked up the message, and carried it to Biggles. Under the curious eyes of the entire squadron he opened it. An extraordinary expression came over his face as he read the letter.

'Flight Commanders will report to my office immediately,' he mapped and, turning on his heels, walked on ahead.

Over his desk he faced them grimly. 'What do you make of that?' he inquired curtly, as he passed a sheet of paper.

The Flight Commanders read it together.

It is requested that Flight Lieutenant Lacey and Lissie be asked how they like their eggs boiled.

'For and on behalf of the officers of Number 701 (Fighter) Squadron.

(Signed)

A. R. WILKINSON.

Squadron Leader.'

'My gosh,' gasped Algy. 'What a put-over.'

'Perhaps you would have the goodness to explain what all this is about,' requested Biggles softly.

Algy acted as spokesman. Clearly and concisely he told the whole story, from Ginger's reprimand by Flight Lieutenant Bitmore up to the masquerade, and the admonition of that officer in front of the unit.

Biggles heard him out in silence.

Well,' he said slowly, there are two aspects of this affair. Wilks had evidently discovered the plot, and has taken this course to get his own back – the course that I, knowing him to be an officer of the finest type, would expect him to take. If he had reported the matter officially I need hardly tell you that you would have been court-martialled. As it is, he has taken an unofficial course. He has put it across us very neatly. At this moment every officer of 701 is probably convulsed with mirth at our expense. Every squadron in the service will know about it, and we shall never hear the last of it. What are we going to do

—'

He stopped abruptly as the door was flung open and Toddy dashed in.

Staff car just arrived, sir, with a load of officers from the Air Ministry,' he gasped. 'I think the Air Chief Marshal is with them.'

Biggles sprang to his feet. Get back to your stations,' he shouted, making for the door.

The Flight Commanders dashed back to their places.

'What a whizzer,' chortled Algy. 'It's a surprise inspection. Won't 701 be sick when they hear about it? The laugh's going to be on our side after all.'

'Absolutely – yes, absolutely,' murmured Bertie.

An hour later the officers and airmen of 666 Squadron were paraded, and addressed by the Air Chief Marshal.

'It gives me great pleasure,' he declared, to see a squadron in the field that can carry itself with such spotless efficiency. I have visited many units recently, but never have I seen one in which such praiseworthy zeal is so obviously displayed by all ranks. Your equipment is a credit to yourselves, your commanding officer, and the service. I shall make it my business to see that the magnificent example you have set is made known to every other squadron by a special Air Ministry Weekly Order. Thank you.'

Biggles's face wore a broad smile as he returned from seeing the staff officers on their way.

'A pretty slice of luck,' he laughed. 'The Air Marshal was So pleased that he asked me if there was any particular request I wished to make. I told him that we should like to come off reserve and go on to first-line duties. He assures me that he'll attend to it right away.'

As a matter of detail, I took the opportunity of mentioning Ginger's arrest to him, and he has promised to put things right with Wing.'

Bertie screwed his Monocle into his eye. 'By Jove! That's Wonderful. Jolly sporting of him – if you see what I mean?'

CHAPTER 6

SO THIS IS WAR!

SQUADRON LEADER BIGGLESWORTH, in full flying kit, -stood outside his Squadron Office, his eyes on the rolling cloud-scape overhead, his ears alert to catch the first ring of the telephone, the signal that would send his squadron into the air. Toddy, the Station Adjutant, was sitting beside it. He was smoking a cigarette, quick, jerkily, often tapping it with his forefinger although there was no ash to shake off.

Outside, spaced at regular intervals, stood ten Spitfires, the pilots of each of the three flights grouped together, talking with apparent unconcern, but obviously waiting for something to happen. From time to time one would glance in the direction of the Squadron Office. An airman would have known at once that they were on vigilance duty, ready to take wing at a moment's notice.

The Boche are a bit later than usual this morning,' observed Doc.' Lorton, a war-scarred veteran of many campaigns who had just arrived to take over the duties of Station Medical Officer.

Biggles nodded. 'Probably waiting to see what the weather is going to do. If it thickens up worse than it is I expect they'll break into small units instead of coming over in big formations. I —'

The telephone jangled shrilly. Toddy snatched up the instrument. For a few seconds he listened; then, replacing the receiver, he turned to Biggles.

Strong enemy sub-units of bombers, escorted by fighters, approaching

the South Foreland,' he rapped out. `Height, twenty-two thousand; course, north-west.'

Steadying his parachute with his left arm, Biggles ran towards his machine. There was no need to warn the others. They, too, had heard the telephone, and were already climbing into their seats.

Settled in his cockpit, Biggles glanced behind him. His hand felt for the throttle, closed over it, and the Spitfire, followed by the three flights in squadron formation, roared into the air.

The cold light of morning grew steadily brighter as the squadron climbed for height. A stiff breeze sprang up in the west, hounding in front of it great masses of cumulus cloud, like colossal cauliflowers, gilded at the top, merging into indigo and purple at the base.

Below, the ground was still three parts covered by long grey blankets of mist through which the earth showed as a patchwork quilt of sombre greens and browns.

The squadron climbed steadily, the leader turning slowly towards the Channel, heading for a strip of blue sky which in one place split the cloud-mass. Entering the opening at sixteen thousand feet, Biggles began to climb more steeply, and presently emerged into a new and lonely world. Mile after mile of gleaming clouds, like masses of cotton-wool, stretched away to the infinite distance, where they cut a hard line across a ceiling of delicate green. Below the ten machines appeared ten shadows, each surrounded by a complete rainbow, racing at incredible speed over the top of the sun-drenched vapour.

As far as Biggles could see, his squadron was alone in the sky. For some time he flew on, still heading south, rounding fantastic pyramids of cloud that seemed to reach to high heaven; compared with them the Spitfires were like midges, drifting along the base of a snow-covered mountain range. He looked anxiously for a break in the cloud-layer, hoping to catch sight of the Channel, to confirm that they had reached it; but the clouds now formed an unbroken expanse, as wild and uncharted as a polar sea, a dividing line between the known and the unknown. Below lay home, friends, and safety; above, mystery, enemies, and death.

Deciding at last that he must have reached the coast, Biggles changed direction and began to fly on a course which he hoped would be parallel with it. His eyes were never still. Above, around, and below they explored the nebulous world, mile by mile, section by section,

seeking the enemy machines which he knew must be there; keeping watch, too, for other Home Defence units that he surmised would also be hunting the same trail.

The squadron was now at twenty thousand feet, but the summits of the clouds still seemed to tower as far above as their bases were below. Sometimes Biggles turned his head to stare in the direction of the sun, pulling down dark goggles to shield his eyes, for the glare was blinding.

'What's happened to them?' he mused, although he was well aware that if the enemy leader had sighted him first he would probably have taken cover in the cloud-bank. He peered forward through his windshield. Directly ahead lay a mighty mountain of mist, and he approached it cautiously, prepared for instant action, knowing that other machines might appear suddenly from the far side. A swift glance over his shoulder revealed the other Spitfires, still in position, like a school of dolphins in a silver sea.

Biggles, ever watchful, noted that the towering cloud fell away on one side into what appeared to be a cavity, and he edged towards it. Looking down over the side of his cockpit, he caught his breath as he found himself gazing into a hole, a pit of incredible size. Straight down for a sheer ten thousand feet the walls of opaque mist dropped into a vast basin, turning slowly from yellow to brown, from brown to purple, and purple to indigo. Ledges occurred at intervals in the precipitous sides, cornices that looked so solid, so concrete, that it seemed as if a man might walk on them.

So taken up was he with this phenomenon that for a moment all else was forgotten; then a movement far below caught his eyes and he knew that his quest was at an end. A number of machines — how many he could not tell — were circling round and round at the bottom of the yawning crater, looking like microscopic fish at the bottom of a deep pool. Occasionally one or more of them would disappear, sometimes to reappear, wings flashing faintly as the reflected light from above caught them. They were too far away for any distinguishing marks to be seen, but a sudden gleam of orange fire streaking diagonally across the void told Biggles all he needed to know. It could only be a machine going down in flames, which meant that a battle was going on in the dim recesses of the mysterious well.

Ginger, flying behind Algy in the leading flight, saw his leader's nose tilt steeply downward. Instinctively his hand moved forward, and the next instant his machine was plunging earthward. It was an awe-

inspiring moment, for the sensation was one of dropping into the very centre of the universe. Down — down — down — he thought the dive would never end. The wind howled over his wings like ten thousand demons trying to bar his progress, but he heeded it not; he was too engrossed in what was happening below. Twice, as they roared down into the chasm, he saw a machine fall out of the fight, leaving behind a streamer of black smoke around which others continued to turn, to dive, and shoot. There were at

least fifty machines there, he decided. He picked out one or two German bombers, but mostly the aircraft were fighters, Hurricanes and Messerschmitt 109's.

A swiftly snatched glance showed him that the squadron was no longer in tight formation; it was beginning to break up as each pilot selected his opponent. He picked out a group of Messerschmitts that were flying close together and raced towards them; but they saw him coming, and scattered like a party of minnows when a pike appears. He picked one out and pursued it relentlessly, his guns grunting viciously in short bursts.

The enemy machine did not burst into flames, as he imagined it would; instead, it zoomed upwards, rolled on to its back, and then, with its engine still on, spun down out of sight through the misty floor of the basin.

Ginger jerked his machine up sharply, and then swerved wildly to avoid collision with a whirling bonfire that was roaring earthward. His nostrils twitched as he hurtled through the smoking trail. The next moment he was shooting again, this time at a Messerschmitt 110; but it was not to be so easily disposed of, for the pilot twisted and turned like a seal with a sea lion at its tail, making it difficult for Ginger to bring his guns to bear. It was the first big dogfight he had been in, and the thought uppermost in his mind was that he must inevitably collide with another machine sooner or later, for aircraft were all around him — Hurricanes, Spitfires, Messerschmitts, Junkers, Heinkels, all zooming and diving, banking and rolling in what seemed to be hopeless confusion.

Somewhat to his surprise he was not afraid. He was conscious only of a strange elation, a burning desire to destroy one of the enemy before he himself was killed — as he never doubted that he would be in the end. It seemed impossible that any machine could survive such an inferno. Yet, curiously enough, it did not occur to him to pull out of it.

He flinched as, something struck his machine with a force that made it quiver. The compass flew to pieces, and the liquid that it contained spurted back in his face.

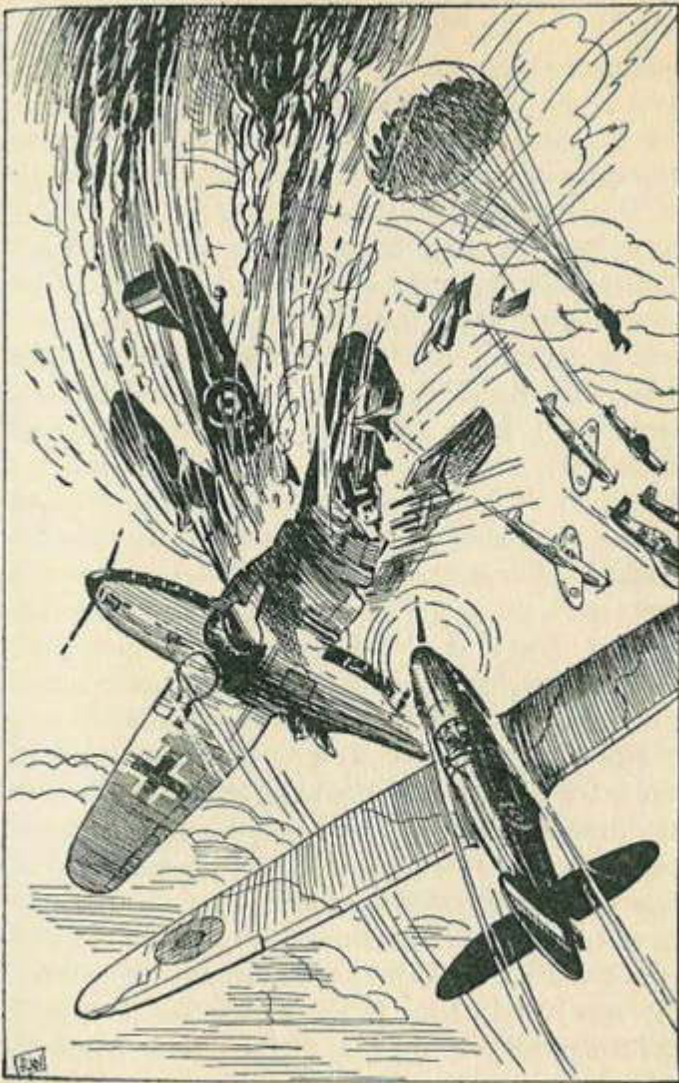
Mechanically he wiped his face with the back of his hand, at the same time looking round quickly for his attacker. Strangely enough, the only machine he could see that was in a position to fire at him was a Hurricane. At such moments the brain works swiftly, and the scene was photographed on his mind; he even noted the squadron identification mark painted in white letters on the Hurricane's nose. But he had no time to ponder the queer incident, for his attention was then entirely taken up by a sight that seemed to turn his blood to ice. Straight across his path a blazing torpedo that had been a Spitfire was going down vertically towards the bottom of the pit. A dark figure, with an arm flung over its face, emerged from the flames and leapt outwards and downwards. A white parachute streaked out behind it. The machine, almost as if it were still under control, seemed to swerve deliberately towards a Heinkel. The German pilot saw his danger and banked like lightning to escape. But he was a fraction of a second too late. The furnace caught the Heinkel fair and square across the fuselage. There was a shower of sparks and debris, then a blinding flash of flame as the tanks of the Nazi machine exploded. Locked in terrible embrace, the two machines twisted earthward and disappeared from view.

Ginger was beginning to find it difficult to think. The whole thing was taking on a quality of unreality that made his movements seem slow and strangely futile. He knew that his flying was getting wild and erratic. Above the roar of engines he could still hear the harsh snarling of multiple machine-guns, but who was shooting, and at whom, he had no idea — until something struck his machine with a crash that made him shrink more tightly into his seat. Looking

back, he saw a Messerschmitt on his tail, and at the sight a wave of cold fury surged through him. With a speed that amazed him he whirled round. Unprepared for the move, the enemy pilot swerved, and overshot him. The next instant the tables were turned.

With a reckless abandon that he would not have dared to employ in normal moments, Ginger dragged the stick back into his thigh. The enemy aircraft floated into sight through the swirling arc of his propeller, and he plunged after it, guns spurting.

At such short range it was almost impossible to miss. One of the Messerschmitt's wings



The furnace caught the Heinkel fair and square across the fuselage

seemed to float upwards; the fuselage dropped earthward, flame licking along its side.

For a moment Ginger watched, fascinated, as the pilot flung himself out of the cockpit into the dreadful void, his hand groping feverishly for his parachute ring. He watched the leather-clad figure turning slowly over and over, diminishing in size, until it was swallowed up in

the mist, and then looked about him to see what was happening. He was just in time to see a swastika-decorated tail disappear into the side of the cloud. Then he was alone.

At first he couldn't believe it. What had become of the Huns? Not one was in sight. Nor a Spitfire. Where, a moment or two before, there had been at least a score of machines, not one remained except his own. A feeling of loneliness came over him, and he turned his eyes upward to the blue disk at the top of the crater. He had a sudden urge to be there, for the sides of the chasm seemed to be falling in on him. Pulling the joystick back, he circled upward.

Reaching the sunny side', he looked round quickly, and was able to make out a number of black specks just disappearing in the distance towards the south. He did not follow, for he knew that he had very little ammunition left. Instead, he decided to return to the aerodrome for more.

Some of the other Spitfires were already back when he reached the aerodrome; airmen swarmed about them, refuelling the tanks and reloading the guns. As he switched off and jumped down he saw Biggles hurrying towards him.

'What do you mean by hanging on by yourself after I had pulled out?' demanded Biggles curtly.

Ginger blinked and shook his head. 'I didn't see you go,' he blurted.

'Are you all right?' Biggles's voice was suddenly tense with anxiety.

Right as rain. My machine is knocked about a bit I believe, but that's all.'

'Good ; I saw you putting in some nice work, laddie. You certainly gave it to that Messerschmitt.'

'As a matter of fact, I believe I got a couple,' claimed Ginger, wondering how on earth a man could be in such a mix-up and yet watch what his pilots were doing. 'Did you see those two machines collide — pretty grim, wasn't it?'

Biggles nodded. 'I got that Hun — the one that nearly crashed into you. It put the wind up me. I thought for a moment he was going to fall on you.'

'Have we lost anybody?' asked Ginger anxiously.

I don't know yet. Algy's back — and Bertie.' Biggles looked across the aerodrome to where two more Spitfires were just landing. 'That makes seven back, anyway.'

I saw one of our machines going down in flames, but the pilot baled out — I couldn't see who it was.'

Toddy ran out of the Squadron Office. 'O.K.,' he called cheerfully. 'Everyone is accounted for. O'Hara baled out, but got down all right; he's on his way home in a taxi.'

Taffy got his tail shot off, but managed to get on the carpet near Foxted. I'm sending transport for him.'

Biggles drew a deep breath. 'Then we've done well,' he declared. 'Let's slip inside and get some coffee. We can allow ourselves ten minutes; then we'll get off again and try to intercept on the way home any bombers that got through.' He turned towards the other pilots, who were standing in little groups comparing notes. Cupping his hands round his mouth he called, 'Stand easy for ten minutes!'

He was walking towards the mess, upon which the other officers were also converging, when the drone of an approaching machine made him turn to see what it was, for as his own machines were all accounted for he knew it could not be one of them.

A Hurricane was coming in low over the boundary hedge, swinging a little as it glided on towards the buildings. He watched it curiously for a moment or two, and a glance at the wind-stocking showed him that the machine was coming in at an angle with the wind.

'That silly ass will pile up if he isn't careful,' he observed casually to Ginger, who had remained at his elbow.

He had started to walk on again, but stopped abruptly as the Hurricane flattened out a good ten feet above the ground, and wallowed as if it were about to pancake.

'Look out, Smyth - watch that machine!' he called tersely.

The Hurricane lost flying speed, dropped heavily on its wheels, bumped, bumped again, and then swerved wildly as it ran to a standstill.

Before it had finished its run Biggles was racing towards it, followed by Ginger, Flight Sergeant Smyth, and several airmen. He swung

himself up to the cockpit, took one swift look at the occupant, and then, straddling the fuselage, started to unbuckle the safety belt round the limp figure in the pilot's seat.

'Take it easy,' he said to the Flight Sergeant, who climbed up to help him 'Ginger, fetch the M.O. . . . Gently; Smyth,' he went on quickly as a crimson stain became visible between the pilot's shoulders.

Together they lifted the wounded man to the ground, resting his head on a folded tunic.

Biggles dropped on a knee and bent low over the ashen face.

'All right, laddie,' he said softly. 'We'll soon fix you up.' The stricken pilot did not answer. He smiled faintly. 'Where are you from?' asked Biggles.

'From 701 - sir . . . Sergeant-Pilot - Graves. Tell . . . tell Squadron Leader Wilkinson - I tried - to get - back.'

'Don't worry about that,' put in Biggles quickly. 'I'll see that he knows how you got your machine down without breaking it.' He caught the Flight Sergeant's eye and shook his head slightly. He had seen the shadow of death too often not to recognize it when he saw it. He bent lower. 'What happened, Graves?' he asked gently.

A puzzled look clouded the dying pilot's eyes. 'I don't understand it - sir,' he breathed. 'It must have been - an accident. He - got me. Am I going - topsides?'

'Not you,' declared Biggles firmly. 'What don't you understand? What was an accident?'

'It was a - Hurricane, sir. He was - on my - tail.' Biggles started. 'You can't mean that!'

'I saw him - shoot. I wasn't - ready —'

Biggles's face was now dead white. He went down on both knees. 'Are you absolutely sure of this?'

'There couldn't be - any mistake - sir.'

'Was it one of your own machines?'

'No, sir. I saw his - number.' The wounded man's voice was now so low that it was hard to catch.

'What was the number ? Try to tell me.'

K-4 - on cowlings. Why is it - getting dark - so early?' The voice rambled on incoherently.

The Medical Officer and two stretcher bearers arrived at the double. The doctor moved Biggles firmly aside. 'All right, leave this to me,' he ordered.

niggles stood up. For a moment he stood looking down at the pale face. Then, biting his lip, he turned away and walked slowly to the Hurricane. A glance showed where the bullets had struck the machine just behind the cockpit. He turned to Algy who, with several other officers, had followed him.

'Did you hear what that boy said?' he inquired in a hard voice.

Algy nodded. 'You mean - about a Hurricane shooting him down ?'

'Yes. I can't believe it though. I can't believe that any pilot would do a thing like that -

even a Nazi. If it happened as Graves described, then it must have been an accident.'

'It was no accident.' Ginger spoke.

Biggles swung round to face him. 'What do you know about it?'

'That same skunk took a shot at me.'

Biggles stared incredulously. 'Are you certain?'

Ginger shrugged his shoulders. 'I felt bullets hitting my machine, looked round, and saw a Hurricane on my tail. There wasn't another machine inside effective range at the time.'

'Why didn't you report this at once?' Biggles's voice was crisp.

To tell you the truth, sir. I forgot about it, although no doubt I should have remembered it later on. Things happened so fast in the dogfight that it went out of my mind.'

'Could you recognize the machine if you saw it again?'

'Easily. I saw the squadron identification marks on the engine cowling.'

What were they ?' K-4.'

The last vestige of blood drained from Biggles's face. His eyes glittered frostily. 'Did you hear Graves mention that number?'

I didn't hear Graves mention anything - I'd gone to fetch the M.O.'

Biggles looked slowly round the stern faces about him. 'You heard that, gentlemen? The same sort of mistake couldn't have happened twice in a few minutes. A Hun must have been flying that machine.'

Or a Fifth-Columnist,' suggested Tug Carrington.

'Same thing,' murmured Tex O'Hara, who had just arrived.

Biggles drew a deep breath. 'All right,' he said grimly. shall have to report this to Headquarters - but —' He glanced at his watch and then at the sky. There's a chance that K-4 went on with the bombers that got through, in which case it will come back with them. That Hurricane must be one of the machines we lost in France when we were there. In that case I imagine it would come over with the bombers, and pretend to be harassing them, so that watchers on the coast wouldn't suspect anything, We've got to find this rat. I'll take responsibility for what happens. No one will shoot unless I fail. If for any reason I have to fall out, Flight Commanders will carry on; but whatever happens we've got to get that machine - if not now, then tomorrow, or the next day. All right! Let's get in the air.'

There was a general rush for the machines.

Once in the air Biggles headed south, for he knew that it was no use chasing the machines that had got through the fighter zone; his only chance now was to intercept them near the Channel on the way home. Looking round he saw that the wind and mounting sun had between them cleared the sky somewhat, but there was still a fair amount of loose cumulus about and, far overhead, a thin layer of feathery cirrus.

By the time he had reached the sea his altimeter needle was on the twenty-thousand mark, and he began a methodical patrol of the coastline, watching the sky to the north, the direction from which the returning raiders must come. There was, he realized, a chance that they would go home by another route, but he felt that as they had already been badly mauled, they would take the shortest way to safety as soon as they had dropped their bombs.

For ten minutes he maintained the patrol, and was just beginning to fear that his quest would fail, when above, and to the north-west, he saw a scattered group of machines heading southward. They were mere specks, and against the background of cirrus they looked like flies crawling across a white ceiling. Disregarding his squadron, knowing that it would follow anyway, he swung round in a steep climbing turn, his oxygen apparatus in action, pursuing a line of flight that would intercept the unknown aircraft. Studying their silhouettes as they became more distinct, he presently made them out to be four Dornier 17 twin-engine bombers, a Junkers 86, and a Heinkel 112 single-seater fighter.

The Hurricane was not with them. However, he had no intention of allowing the machines to escape if he could prevent it, so he settled down to the pursuit. He knew that the enemy pilots had seen him from the way they altered course in an attempt to evade combat; but the Spitfire was faster, and Biggles's lips became a thin, bloodless line as the distance between them shortened.

He had nearly drawn within range when a Hurricane suddenly appeared on the scene, close behind the raiders; where it came from he did not see, for his eyes were on the enemy machines, but his muscles tightened as they lighted on the new-comer, which began weaving about behind the bombers as if it were attacking them.

A cold smile, bitter as arctic sunshine, settled on Biggles's face as he watched, for the pretence was almost childish and would not have deceived any airman of experience.

The Hurricane pilot was playing his part well enough, but the bombers were letting him down by completely ignoring him, whereas, had the Hurricane been what it pretended to be, the gunners would have been in action; moreover, there were times when the Hurricane and the Heinkel were close together, yet the German fighter made no attempt to drive off the British machine. Looking down, Biggles saw that they were still a few miles inside the coast-line. Some scattered archie bursts appeared near the raiders, but faded out quickly as the Spitfire closed in.

Biggles ignored the bombers — he felt that he could safely leave them to the others. In any case he had no interest in them. He concentrated entirely on the Hurricane, which, to his intense satisfaction, apparently confident of its immunity, now came towards him. He watched it closely, with cold, dispassionate eyes, trying to make out the number on its nose. He could see that there was a number, a white

squadron identification symbol, but the machine, by constantly changing its course, made it hard to read.

'Let's see if two can play at fox,' murmured Biggles softly to himself, and then began to turn away as if he intended to attack the bombers. But his eyes did not leave the Hurricane for an instant. No sooner had he turned than it swept across his rear, and he knew that his ruse was successful. 'So I'm to be the next victim, am I?' he grated. 'Well, we'll see.'

Slowly he turned still further towards the bombers, and then showed his teeth in a mirthless smile as the Hurricane

pilot dropped his nose and tore down on his tail. 'Not so fast,' he grunted, and whirled like a flash of light.

The Hurricane, unready for so sudden a move, sheered away, but not before Biggles had seen distinctly the markings on its engine cowling. They seemed to blaze like a neon sign, and his lips parted as they murmured K-4'.

It was all he wanted to know. With a swift, savage Movement of his arm he thrust the joystick forward for speed, and then shot up steeply in a climbing turn that brought him alongside his objective. As his nose came round, bringing his guns in line, he could see the face in the other cockpit staring at him. A suspicion that something was wrong may have occurred to the Hurricane pilot, for the face suddenly disappeared and the machine started to bank away.

Calmly, but very deliberately, Biggles brought his guns to bear, and fired one of the longest bursts he had ever fired in his life. For a full eight seconds he held it, held it while his eight guns poured out their stream of bullets, raking the Hurricane from end to end. He could see pieces being ripped off the machine under that fearful storm of lead, and the sight filled him with a satisfaction unusual in such circumstances.

He had no doubt what the result would be. Nor was he mistaken. The machine fell away on its port wing; the nose swung down and it went into a tight spin. He followed it down to make sure. But there was no sham. The Hurricane continued its spin, to crash finally on open country behind the Downs. As it struck the ground it went to pieces in a shower of debris.

Not until then did the dreadful truth of what he had done really come home to him. He felt suddenly sick in his stomach. What if he had

made a mistake? What if —?

The suspense was more than he could bear. Side-slipping steeply to lose height more quickly, he went lower, and flattened out over the short turf near the crash. The moment his machine had come to a stop he jumped down and began running towards the wreckage, trying to reach it before a number of soldiers who were converging on the spot. He did so, and raising his arm, ordered the troops back.

‘All right, you fellows, keep clear!’ he cried loudly. ‘There may be danger here. . . . I don’

t mean you,’ he added quickly, as he noticed an officer, an infantry captain, among them.

‘Poor fellow,’ murmured the officer brokenly as he joined Biggles. ‘It’s one of our boys.’

‘It’s certainly one of our machines,’ returned Biggles evenly. ‘You might have a look to see who was flying it.’ ‘But I don’t understand what you mean —’

‘Take a look – then perhaps you will.’

Biggles heard the captain catch his breath sharply. Great heavens,’ he whispered hoarsely, ‘it’s a Jerry – at least, he’s in Jerry uniform.’

Biggles nodded. ‘A wolf in sheep’s clothing,’ he sneered. ‘He got one of our lads this morning, so he’s got what was coming to him – if that’s any comfort to you. You’d better get your fellows away and keep this to yourself. I imagine there’ll be a Court of Inquiry, so you might let me have your name. Your evidence will be wanted. Meanwhile I’ll leave this for you to look after.’

Deep in thought Biggles walked slowly back to his machine.

‘So this is war!’ he brooded.

Overhead, seven Spitfires were circling, waiting.

CHAPTER 7

CUTHBERT COMES - AND

GOES

ONE of the strangest but most characteristic features of war flying is the manner in which comedy and tragedy so often go hand in hand. Overnight, a practical joke may set a pilots' mess rocking with mirth; by dawn, the perpetrator of it may have gone for a long spell in hospital - if not for ever. But the joke will persist to perpetuate his memory, and those who tell it, and those who hear it, will laugh and laugh again, honest, spontaneous laughter - for tears must find no place in the eyes of those who hunt the skies. They know that Old Man Death stands near their elbow, but it does not worry them. They never allude to it except in fun, for this is the only philosophy for a war pilot. Thus was it at 666 (Fighter) Squadron, now generally known throughout the Fighter Command as Biggles's Squadron.

The weather remained indifferent, but the Spitfires were in the air most of the day, the pilots snatching short rests as opportunity occurred, perhaps while their machines were being refuelled. At such times they usually foregathered in the ante-room, lounging, probably with refreshment in their hands or at their elbows. Such a party was now in progress. Algy Lacey, in charge of A Flight, was there, with Ginger Hebblethwaite, his right-hand pilot. Flight Lieutenant Lord

Bertie Lissie, monocle in eye, reclined on a settee, nibbling an egg sandwich. Near him, against the mantelpiece, a glass of barley water on the shelf, Tug Carrington balanced himself on his toes while he regarded with undisguised disfavour a glass of beer that was being handed by a mess waiter to Tex O'Hara, who had just come in. He was still in flying kit, but the upper part was thrown open to display a scarlet and black striped football shirt - a garment for which he appeared to have a strong attachment.

Using his left hand to emphasize his remarks (the right being occupied with refreshment) he was describing a combat in which he had just been engaged.

'He turned, and I turned,' he continued. 'And there he was, stone cold in my sights. I pressed the button' - his forehead wrinkled in a grimace of disgust - and nothing happened. My guns had packed up. Say! What do you know about that? Well, it wasn't their fault,' he resumed. 'There wasn't anything in 'em. First time in my life, I guess, that I've run out of slugs without knowing it. It was nearly the last. Luckily for me the Hun had had enough, and beat it like a bat out of a chimney. He's probably still wondering why I didn't go after him Well, I've got to hand it to him - that guy certainly Could fly.'

Mebbe

He broke off, and all eyes turned to the swing doors as they were pushed open and a stranger entered. A single thin ring in his sleeves proclaimed him to be a Pilot Officer, and those present who knew that a reserve officer had been posted to the unit assumed the new-comer to be he. Naturally they regarded him with interest, and - it must be admitted - without enthusiasm, for he was little more than a youth, but unusually fat, with a round, ruddy-complexioned face from which peered two small twinkling eyes. His hair was long and lank, and knew no parting.

He did not enter the ante-room as one would expect a new officer to enter — that is, with a certain amount of respect. There was nothing in the slightest degree respectful about his manner. What he did was to fling the doors wide and, holding them open with outstretched arms, cry in a shrill voice, 'Any more for Marble Arch?' He then emitted a series of sounds that formed an excellent imitation of a train starting, punctuated with the usual slamming of doors.

The rumble of the departing train' died away as the stranger advanced across the room and seated himself at a card table. But the performance was not finished, as the startled spectators were to discover.

'Two to Waterloo ! ' he cried sharply.

He followed this instantly by bringing down his elbow smartly on the table, at the same time letting his fist fall forward so that his knuckles also struck the wood. The noise produced, which can only be described as 'clonk-clonk, clonk-clonk', was precisely the sound made in a railway booking-office by the instrument used for punching the date on a ticket.

Having completed these items from his repertoire, the newcomer sat back with a smile and awaited the applause he evidently expected. There was, in fact, a general titter, for the imitations had been well executed.

Tug, whose nerves were a bit on edge, did not join in, however. He was tired, and the sudden disturbance irritated him. He merely stared at the round, laughing face with faint surprise and dour disapproval.

What do you think you are — a railway station ?' he asked coldly.

The other nodded. 'I'm not always a railway, though. Sometimes I'm an aeroplane.'

Is that so?' put in Tex slowly.

Another titter ran round the room and the stranger rose.

Yes,' he said, sometimes I'm a Spitfire.

À Spitfire!' gasped Bertie, dropping his monocle in his agitation.

The other nodded. 'I can do any sort of aeroplane I like, with any number of engines, but I like the Spitfire best. Watch me.'

Forthwith he gave a brilliant sound-imitation of a Spitfire being started up. With vibrating lips producing the roar of the engine, he ran round the room with his arms —

which were evidently intended to be the planes of the machine — outstretched. He landed' neatly in an open space, and then taxied realistically back to his seat.

As the 'engine' backfired and then died away with a final swish-swoosh there was a shout of laughter in which everybody joined.

'Pretty good,' admitted Algy Lacey. 'By the way, what's your name ?'

'Mooney — Cuthbert Mooney — but don't blame me for that. Year of birth, 1921.

Educated, Harrow. Occupation, inventor. Religion --'

Àll right, that's enough,' interrupted Algy. 'You won't mind my saying that it is my considered opinion that you are slightly off your rocker ?'

Cuthbert raised his eyebrows. Only slightly? My dear sir, you do me less than justice. My father is firmly convinced, and never fails to tell me, that I am absolutely balmy. At school they called me Looney Mooney.'

'They were probably right,' nodded Algy. 'We shall no doubt think the same when we know you better. Did I hear you say that you were an inventor?'

Cuthbert laid a finger on his lips. 'Ssh!' he breathed, glancing round furtively. Spies may be listening. Presently I' will show you some of the inventions I have produced in readiness for my debut in a service squadron.'

Algy started. 'Don't you go messing about with our machines,' he said,

frowning.

Cuthbert looked pained. 'I wouldn't dream of doing such a thing,' he declared. But wait till you see some of my —'

'Is Mr Mooney here, please?' called a mess waiter from the door.

Cuthbert looked round. 'Yes, what is it?'

'The C.O. wants to see you in the office, sir.'

'I'm on my way,' replied Cuthbert, rising. Emitting an unbelievable volume of sound that could be recognized as a two-stroke motor-cycle, he steered himself to the door and disappeared.

'Looney Mooney,' murmured Algy. 'If he goes on like that on the ground, think what he must be like in the air. I should say that the Flight Commander who gets the job of trailing him around the sky is in for a thin time. Why, Bertie, he makes you seem almost sane!'

The orderly appeared again. Flight Lieutenant Lacey, please, wanted on the telephone,'

he called.

Algy hurried from the room. Three minutes later he returned and resumed his seat.



There was a curious expression on his face. He looked up and caught Bertie's eyes.

'Have you been awarded the V.C. or something?' inquired Bertie.

`No, but I shall deserve it by tonight - if I live to see it,' muttered Algy morosely.

`Why, what's doing?'

`Cuthbert has been posted to my flight, and he wants me to show him the coast - this afternoon.'

The shout of laughter that went up could be heard on the far side of the aerodrome.

When Algy went to the flight hangar after lunch he found the new member of his flight waiting for him. Cuthbert had evidently been making some adjustments to his machine, for his hands were filthy.

`Come and have a look at my new device for keeping Huns off my tail,' he invited. 'You'

ll be sorry for the Hun who gets behind me - and so will he.'

`No, thanks. Personally, I prefer to see that a Hun doesn't get behind me. In this squadron, when we see Huns we go for them - we don't turn our tails to them.'

Ì see,' murmured Cuthbert, unabashed. Then you don't want to look —'

`No, thanks,' said Algy again. 'I think I shall be able to manage with my guns.'

`Just as you like.'

Àll I want you to do this afternoon,' went on Algy, is to keep your eyes on me. Stick close, and try to pick up as many landmarks as you can. We're going to fly along the coast, but I don't expect we shall go far over the water, if at all. In any case, keep close to me whatever happens.'

Cuthbert nodded. Ì will,' he said seriously.

Five minutes later the two Spitfires were in the air, climbing in wide circles in the direction of the coast. From time to time Algy tilted a wing and indicated some outstanding landmark - a river, a wood, or a road, noting with satisfaction that the pilot he was escorting flew well and kept in his place.

For an hour or more they flew on, following the coast, and then began

the return journey.

Algy, who never lost an opportunity of picking up some useful information, edged farther over the Channel, trying to locate the big guns that he knew had been installed along the French coast, which he could see easily. In this occupation he was startled by Cuthbert, who suddenly drew level with him and, having attracted his attention, pointed.

Algy, following the direction, saw a number of tiny specks far above them in the blue.

Mentally congratulating the beginner on his watchfulness and 'spotting' ability, he turned away, at the same time subjecting the sky around to a searching scrutiny. What was going on? He did not know, but he felt that something was happening, and his eyes probed the atmosphere in order to find out what it was. He had no wish to be caught in an awkward predicament with a new man on his hands. Still watching the sky, he saw a Junkers 88, several thousand feet above him and making for home. He kept his eyes on it for a moment or two, feeling that as the enemy aircraft was so near home pursuit was not worth while.

But this evidently did not suit Cuthbert, who banked steeply, and set off on the trail of the enemy aircraft.

Rightly or wrongly, Algy always blamed himself for what followed, for he was the leader, and should at once have turned for home, in which case Cuthbert would no doubt have followed him. But Cuthbert's enthusiasm spoilt his better judgment, and after a quick look round to make sure that the sky was clear behind them, he held on after the enemy machine. Frankly he did not suppose that they would catch it, but it was good practice, and provided they did not go too far out over the Channel there was no particular danger.

It was unfortunate that Cuthbert, in his anxiety to overtake the Junkers, should take the lead at the very moment that Algy's engine began to give trouble. At first it was only a faint vibration, but it was sufficient to bring a frown to his face. The revolution indicator needle was already falling back.

It was now Algy's turn to try to catch Cuthbert, but he could not do so. His pupil's attention was riveted on the Junkers, and not once did he look at his leader. Algy fumed, but in vain. He was only twenty or thirty yards behind, but both machines were flying on full throttle and

he had no reserve of speed to overtake the other. On the contrary, his engine began to knock, and he fell farther behind.

"This is no use — I shall have to get back,' he muttered savagely. ' Cuthbert will have to take his luck.' He throttled back to cruising speed to take some of the strain off the engine, and swung round in the direction of the coast, now two or three miles away.

Once he had turned, the distance between the two Spitfires increased at tremendous speed, but he watched the other as long as he could, and it may have been due to this fact that he failed to notice what normally he would have seen. But what he did see, to his infinite relief, was this. Cuthbert turned suddenly and came racing after him. Satisfied that there was now nothing to worry about, he throttled back still farther, and began a long glide towards home. Wondering why Cuthbert had turned so suddenly, he resumed his systematic searching of the sky. But he did not look very long. His muscles stiffened as his eyes picked out a formation of machines not more than two miles away, flying on a course to cut him off. There was no need to look twice to identify them. They were Messerschmitt 109's, and that the enemy machines had seen him was clear.

A cold hand seemed to settle over his heart as he watched them — not for himself, but for Cuthbert, who was still a good two miles behind him. Bitterly Algy repented his folly in allowing himself to be persuaded so far from the coast with an untried beginner. He toyed with his throttle to try to squeeze a few more revs. out of his engine, but it became worse instead of better.

What should he do? To wait for Cuthbert in such circumstances was sheer suicide, and even if he did wait there was little he could do. He hoped and prayed that Cuthbert would see the danger and turn off at a tangent, in which case he might beat the enemy machines to the English coast - certainly if they stopped to deal with him, Algy, first.

But either Cuthbert did not see or else he was made of sterner stuff, for straight as an arrow he held his machine towards the approaching storm. As a last resort Algy, too, deliberately turned towards the enemy, although what he was going to do was not clear, for his engine revs. were still falling so there was really no question of fighting.

Cuthbert now moved nearer to him, and it, gave him an idea. Perhaps by diving they might still reach safety. With this object in view he turned again towards the coast and, pushing his stick forward, dived steeply towards the white cliffs now only a mile or so distant. Behind

him came Cuthbert, perhaps a quarter of a mile away; then followed the enemy formation of twelve machines. Having the advantage of height, they thundered down, tails cocked high in the air, and the distance between them and the two British machines closed swiftly.

Algy, flying with his head twisted over his shoulder, saw that the Messerschmitts would catch Cuthbert first, and he gritted his teeth in impotence. What he could not understand was that Cuthbert appeared to be making no particular effort to overtake him.

They were practically over the coast-line when the shooting began, and Algy caught his breath when he saw Cuthbert's machine swerve as if it had been hit; but it recovered quickly, and swung back on its original course immediately behind him. At the same time its nose went down into a steeper dive until it was not more than a hundred yards in the rear. But the Messerschmitts were also closing up.

'They'll get him - they're bound to get him,' thought Algy, sick with apprehension, for Cuthbert was still flying in a dead straight line although the whole enemy pack was on his tail. 'Why doesn't he do something - roll, loop, spin, anything rather than sit still and be shot like a rabbit? Or is he waiting for me to do something?'

The knowledge that Cuthbert would think he was running away brought a flush to his cheeks, but he could do nothing. Never had he felt so utterly helpless. How was Cuthbert to know that his engine had packed up ?

He braced himself for the worst. Instead, he saw the most amazing spectacle that it had ever been his lot to witness. As the Messerschmitts roared in to deliver the knock-out blow, a streak of orange fire, followed by a trail of smoke, spurted backwards from the Spitfire. What it was he could not imagine. His first impression was that Cuthbert's machine was on fire, but as a second streamer of fire leapt backwards he knew that this was not so. Spellbound, he could only watch.

At the appearance of the first fiery missile the Messerschmitts had swerved wildly, as indeed they had every reason to do, and the thing - whatever it was - actually passed between the two leading machines. It also went very close to one of those in the rear. At the appearance of the second one there was general confusion as each pilot tried to avoid it.

In the mix-up the wings of two of them became locked. For perhaps two seconds they clung together; then they broke apart and, shedding woodwork and fabric, plunged downwards.

Algy watched speechlessly, still unable to understand what was happening, but conscious that two of the enemy machines had gone - a fact that filled him with no small satisfaction.

Two more streamers of fire and smoke hurtled aft from Cuthbert's machine; they went wide, but they served their purpose. The Messerschmitts had had enough. The enemy formation scattered as the machines pulled out in all directions, and although they hung about in the vicinity, presumably to watch the fire-spitting phenomenon, they gave up the pursuit.

Algy gave a heart-felt sigh of relief, hardly daring to believe that escape was now practically an accomplished fact. His brain became normal, and into his mind for the first time crept snatches of the conversation on the tarmac before they had begun the flight.

What was it Cuthbert had said? 'Come and see my device . . . you'll be sorry for the Hun who gets on my tail.'

That must have been the device he had seen working, but what on earth was it? It looked as if it might have been a glorified Very pistol attached to some part of the machine, trained to fire backwards and operated from the cockpit. But how the dickens did Cuthbert reload? The missile was too big for a Very light, anyway.

Algy wasted no more time guessing. What concerned him now was how to get on the ground without cracking up, for his engine was too far gone for him to hope to get back to the aerodrome. He looked about anxiously for a suitable place to set the machine down. He picked out a field, small and by no means level, and was about to side-slip towards it when he became aware that Cuthbert's machine was acting in a curious manner. The engine had been cut off, and it seemed to be slipping from left to right.

Once it nearly stalled, and the pilot caught it in the nick of time.

Algy watched, with his heart in his mouth, only too well aware that something was wrong. As the Spitfire shot past him, steering a zigzag course for the same field in which he himself proposed to land, he half expected Cuthbert to make some sort of signal, but he did not. With head erect, sitting stiffly in the cockpit, he seemed to be staring fixedly ahead. The Spitfire went straight on towards the ground. Algy, dry-lipped, knew what was going to happen, for he had seen machines go down like that before. Out of the corner of his eye, as he glided over the hedge of the field, he saw the other plane half flatten out, but too late. The undercarriage was swept off in a cloud of mud and grass.

The Spitfire bounced high into the air, stalled, and then drove nose first into the ground.

Algy landed and, without waiting for his machine to finish its run, leapt out, only to sprawl headlong; but he was on his feet in an instant, running like a hare towards the crash, for a little wisp of steam was rising sluggishly into the air from the engine, and he grew cold at the thought that he might be too late. For he knew what the steam portended. He knew it was petrol vapour from a fractured tank running over hot cylinders. But the dreaded horror of fire had not occurred when he reached the machine.

Cuthbert was still strapped in his seat, in a crumpled position.

Troops were running towards the spot, for the machines had come down near a camp.

'Quick!' snapped Algy, as he tried to drag aside a cable that was holding the pilot in his seat. He knew that the danger of fire was by no means past; one dying spark from the magneto and the petrol-soaked wreckage would go up like gunpowder. He had seen it happen before.

'Now then — all together — pull!' he cried, as willing hands came to

the rescue. Between them they got the unconscious pilot free and laid him gently on the grass.

Cuthbert opened his eyes as Algy's hands ran over him, searching for what he hoped he would not find — the damp patch over a bullet that had found its billet.

'Where did they get you, laddie ?' he asked, for he felt certain that Cuthbert had been hit.

The wounded man blinked, and forced a smile. 'Got me through the legs,' he breathed.

Before Algy could do anything more an ambulance with R.A.M.C. men arrived; field dressings were produced and first aid applied.

'You'll be O.K., ' Algy said cheerfully when the doctor told him that the wounds were not serious. 'You must have fainted from loss of blood.'

Cuthbert nodded weakly.

'Why the dickens didn't you make for home faster when you saw that bunch on your tail?'

muttered Algy.

'I wasn't in a hurry,' answered Cuthbert. 'You see, I was anxious to try out my new apparatus, but the Huns were a bit too quick for me. One of them got me first burst -

confound him.'

'What the dickens was it?' Algy demanded.

Rockets. I've made a gadget to hold them on backwards, so that they shoot behind me. I'll show you how it works when I come back from hospital.'

Cuthbert was lifted into the ambulance. Algy gripped his hand.

Cheerio, kid,' he said. 'I'll tell the C.O. you put up a great show.'

Thanks,' murmured Cuthbert. His elbow came down smartly on the side of the vehicle, and his fist followed it.

The ambulance driver looked round in surprise at the sound - clonk-

clonk . . clonk-clonk.

'What was that?' he asked.

'Two to Waterloo,' grinned Cuthbert. CHAPTER 8

THE LOVE SONG

SQUADRON LEADER BIGGLESWORTH knew that he had a visitor even before he landed after making a short test flight to check certain adjustments that had been made to his Spitfire, for his ever-roving eyes had picked out a car standing at the door of the Squadron Office.

She's still inclined to fly a bit left wing low,' he told the sergeant rigger, as he shed his parachute and walked over to the office.

'Air Commodore Raymond, of Air Intelligence, is inside,' Toddy told him.

Biggles found the air officer pacing the room impatiently. 'Good afternoon, sir,' he greeted, saluting. 'Nice of you to look me up —'

'You may change your mind in a minute,' interrupted the Air Commodore, tersely. 'The fact is, Biggles, I'm in a mess.'

'I might have known it,' murmured Biggles sadly. 'Why?'

Because that's the only time you honour us with a visit.'

'I know - I know. It must look that way to you. But this is really serious.'

'I seem to have heard that before, too,' said Biggles softly. 'Sit down, sir - have a cigarette? What's the trouble?'

'I'll tell you in as few words as possible. You know Amiens and the country round it pretty well, don't you?' Er — fairly well,' admitted Biggles cautiously.

'You know the little church in the Rue Ste Marie — just behind the Hotel de Ville ?'

Yes, I know it — that is, if it's still there now that the Nazis are in possession of the town.'

'I want you to go there for me.'

Biggles started, staring. You want me — to go to Amiens?'

The air officer nodded, and took a large-scale map from his portfolio. 'These are the facts,' he said crisply. 'There is, in Amiens, a man named Marcel Bregard. Until recently he was one of the designers of the Rhone Aviation Company. At the time of the German break-through he was working on a special supercharger for radial engines. When the German advance guard rushed the town he put the plans in his pocket to prevent them from falling into German hands, and bolted to the aerodrome, hoping to fly to England with them. But he was too late. The enemy was already in possession. In sheer desperation he went back to the town. By this time it was dark, and he had the misfortune to be knocked down by somebody on a motor-cycle. His right leg was broken, but he managed to crawl to comparative safety. It seems that he had a friend, a girl who lived in the Rue Ste Marie — she ran a little tobacco business there. The house is number one, and is easily identified because it is next door to the church. Well, this girl, whose name is Renee, took him in. He is still there, and is still in possession of the plans — or he was shortly before we heard about this.'

'How did you hear about it?'

'In rather a strange way ; through a British Tommy a lad named Corporal Price. As you probably know, some of our fellows got cut off in the town. Some were captured; others went into hiding, when they could find French people to conceal them — and there were plenty willing to take that risk. Renee took charge of Corporal Price and hid him in a cellar. There he met Bregard, who subsequently told him about the plans. Bregard was, of course, stuck there on account of his broken leg, although being a Frenchman and not in uniform, he was in no danger of arrest. Price determined to get back to England and bring the plans with him. Arrangements were made, but unfortunately the day before he was due to leave he was captured. He was sent to Germany, but jumped the train, pinched a bicycle, and got down to Spain, from where he subsequently made his way home.'

Smart lad.'

Air Commodore Raymond nodded. 'He came straight to us with the story. That was last night.'

'How long since he left Amiens ?'

'Nearly three weeks.'

'Anything can have happened in that time.'

Tie Air Commodore shrugged his shoulders. 'It would be foolish to dispute that; but, on the other hand, there is a good chance that Bregard may still be there, with the plans still in his possession, in which case it is up to us to try to make contact with him.'

'But even assuming that somebody got through to him, how would he know that the person was genuine and not a German agent?'

'Because, fortunately, there was a kind of password in use between Renee, Price, and Bregard, when they were all in the house, a method which they used among themselves when danger threatened. They had to devise some such signal because German troops were often in the shop. Apart from that, the man we sent could soon establish his bona fides by mentioning Corporal Price and details of his stay there.'

Biggles nodded. 'I understand. What was this password?'

'As a matter of fact, it was the first line or two of a popular French song.' With a ridiculous expression on his face the Air Commodore began to sing: Parlez moi d'amour,

Redites-moi des choses tendres . .

Biggles stared at the astonishing spectacle of an Air Commodore crooning. His mouth twitched in a smile of frank incredulity.

'For the love of Mike!' he breathed. 'This war gets funnier and funnier.'

'What's wrong with my singing?' demanded the Air Commodore stiffly.

'Nothing - nothing, sir. I was just wondering what the airmen would think if they could see you lilting that little lullaby.'

'Don't you know the song?'

'Speak to me of love,' translated Biggles, his lips curling in a sneer. 'What gave you the idea that I cluttered up my brain with that sort of stuff?'

'It's a nice song.'

Biggles grinned. 'I'll sing it to the next Nazi pilot I meet - to a machine-gun accompaniment.'

'Come, come, Biggles,' protested the Air Commodore, 'you need only learn the first two lines - that will be as much as you'll need.'

'As much as I need ?'

Yes. You don't suppose I'm telling you this story just to pass the time, do you? Come on, Bigglesworth - will you go?'

'Why pick on me, for heaven's sake?'

- 'Because you speak German and French. Also you can fly an aeroplane. There's no other way of getting in and out of France!'

Biggles lit a cigarette. 'I see,' he said sarcastically. 'I just fly over, raising my hat to any Messerschmitts I meet on the way, land on a German aerodrome, and stroll up the boulevards singing, "Speak to me of love—".'

'I'm not pretending it's easy.'

'I should jolly well think you aren't!'

'I can let you have a German uniform.'

Biggles's lips curled. 'Not on your life. When I stop a bullet it will be in my own pants.'

'As you like - it was only a suggestion,' returned the Air Commodore drily. 'Obviously, you will have to go over at night and land in a field outside the town. I've marked one or two on this map that might be suitable. In any case, you ought to know the country round Amiens pretty well from the number of times you've flown over it. But there, it isn't for me to suggest how you go about the job. Will you have a shot at it?'

'You know perfectly well that I can't say no,' answered Biggles quietly. 'When do you want me to go?'

'Immediately - tonight. Every day that passes lessens our chances of getting the plans.'

The weather conditions should be ideal. There will be a moon early on - it will set at about eleven; which means that it will be light enough for you to find your selected field.

Then, when it is dark, there will be less likelihood of your machine being seen while it is on the ground.'

'All right, sir. I'll see what I can do,' promised Biggles.

The Air Commodore, his mission achieved, did not linger.

'I'll be along first thing in the morning to collect the plans,' he said, holding out his hand.

You ought to be back by daybreak.'

If I'm not,' said Biggles slowly, it would be a waste of time for you to wait here for me.'

After the purr of the Air Commodore's car had died away he took from a drawer his own map of northern France and, with great care, plotted a course to a certain field, a field that he knew well, for he had once made a forced landing on it. Making a note on a scrap of paper, he then went out to look at the weather. The sky was clear, but the sun was going down in a misty glow. For a moment or two he regarded it reflectively, and then rang the bell for Toddy.

'I'm going to practise a little night-flying tonight,' he announced evenly. 'I may be away for some time, so don't worry on my account.'

Toddy eyed him suspiciously. 'What time will you be leaving the ground, sir?'

'About ten o'clock.'

'Can you give me any idea what time you'll be back?' 'Does it matter?'

Toddy looked uncomfortable. 'Well, sir, I thought I'd better know, in case the Wing Commander rang up, wanting you for something.'

'If he does, tell him I hope to be back not later than dawn,' said Biggles, and walked towards the ante-room whence came the sound of singing.

Toddy gazed thoughtfully at the swing door after it had closed. He looked up the road where the Air Commodore's car had disappeared. Then, with a far-away look in his eyes, he went into the C.O.'s office. He noticed the map, still lying on the desk, and studied it intently. A thin pencil line could not be overlooked.

Àh—huh,' he murmured softly.

It was shortly after ten when Biggles left the ante-room. He went first to his quarters, where he put on a light raincoat of civilian pattern; then, collecting his flying kit on the way, he walked on to the

camouflaged shelter that housed his Spitfire. Had he been less wrapped up in his thoughts, which were concentrated on the enterprise before him, he might have noticed that as he left the ante-room there was a sudden cessation of conversation. Had he turned, he might have observed a number of furtive figures watching him from the darkened mess.

'There he goes,' whispered Toddy to Algy Lacey.

Biggles walked on. Flight Sergeant Smyth was standing by his machine when he reached it.

'Everything all right, Flight Sergeant?' asked Biggles curtly.

'Yes, sir. I've lightened her as much as I can. The tanks are only half full. She should glide a long way for every thousand feet of height.'

'Thanks. I'll get off.'

In five minutes Biggles was in the air, climbing steeply, flying on a course slightly east of south. By the time he reached the coast, which he crossed near Hastings, he was at twenty thousand feet, and still climbing. Not a light showed anywhere, but in the wan glow of the dying moon he could easily make out the Channel. Far away to the east occasional flashes brightened the sky, like summer lightning, and showed where machines of the Bomber Command were battering the enemy gun emplacements on the Cap Gris Nez. A few minutes later the French coast came into sight, a vast, sombre shadow that merged into a vague horizon. He could just make out the river Somme of tragic memory, with Abbeville trying to hide well inside the estuary.

He was at twenty-five thousand feet now, breathing oxygen, and while still some distance from the coast he cut his engine, and began a long glide, holding the aircraft at a speed only just above stalling point. He watched the sky around him for searchlights, or the flashes of anti-aircraft shells, which would tell him that his presence had been discovered; but none came, and he glided on like a shadow through the sky, fol-

, lowing the river which sprawled like a grey thread across the darkened landscape. Still there was no flak. Sinking gradually lower, he crept on, the faint glow of the dials on his instrument-board casting an eerie reflection on his face. Amiens, his objective, appeared ahead.

He left the river now and, picking up a poplar-lined road, followed it for a little way before beginning a slow circle over the bleak,

hedgeless panorama which is peculiar to northern France. His hand moved to the ignition switch, and the droning airscrew stopped abruptly. Then, with the air hissing gently over his wings, he steepened his glide, nosing towards a large field just north of the town. His face was expressionless; there was nothing on it to indicate the tremendous consequences that depended on the next few minutes. Automatically he lowered his undercarriage. Still watching the ground, he flattened out suddenly; the Spitfire's flaps dragged at the air; the wheels bumped, bumped again; the machine lurched a little and came slowly to rest.

In an instant Biggles was sitting on the edge of the cockpit, listening, eyes probing the darkness around him. He did not move. Nothing moved. There was no sound. Minutes passed, and still he sat there, every nerve taut, eyes staring, and ears alert for the first warning of danger. For a quarter of an hour he sat thus, as rigid as a graven image. Then he jumped to the ground and walked round the machine in widening circles to check the distance at which it could be seen. Satisfied, he returned to it and, lifting the tail unit, carried it round so that the nose was pointing to the longest run the field could provide.

This done, he strode towards the vague silhouette of a line of poplars which he knew marked the road. No one was in sight, so without any attempt at concealment he set off at a brisk pace in the direction of the town.

He encountered a pedestrian and a cyclist. The pedestrian wished him good night in German, and he answered in the same language. The cyclist spoke in French, and he replied with a gruff bon soir. Apart from this he had a brief period of anxiety when a lorry overtook him. He knew it contained German soldiers long before it reached him, from the songs they were singing. It rumbled past him without stopping — not that there was any reason why it should — and shortly afterwards he reached the town. It was, of course, in darkness, and deserted, but this did not surprise him, and still without any attempt to hide he headed for the Rue Ste Marie.

Knowing the town well, he was taking a short cut through a back street when, without warning, a man stepped out of the shadows, and speaking peremptorily in German, demanded his pass.

Taken by surprise, for a moment Biggles did not understand. 'Pass?' he echoed, his hand, unseen in the darkness, dropping into the side pocket of his coat.

'Curfew is at ten o'clock,' replied the German brusquely. 'You know that — or do you?'



He dragged the limp body into the side entrance. (page 110)

He took a step forward, peering.

Biggles, of course, had no pass. He knew nothing of a curfew, although he realized now that he should have been prepared for such

a regulation. The deserted streets were explained. His eyes made a swift reconnaissance of them, but as far as he could see he and his interrogator were alone.

Oh, yes, the pass,' he said lightly, and withdrew his hand from his pocket.

The butt of his heavy service automatic crashed down on the German's head, and the man flopped to the ground like a suit of clothes from a hook.

Biggles was bending over him in a flash. His hands closed over the fallen man's collar, and he dragged the limp body into the side entrance of what he took to be a garage. Then he walked on quickly, regretting the incident, but feeling that he had had no alternative but to act as he had done. Without a pass arrest would have been certain.

Aware now of a danger for which he had made no provision, he proceeded with more caution, listening at the corner of every street before he turned into it, until at last the church of Ste Marie loomed above him.

He went straight to the doorway of number one. It was a little shop, and the word 'Tabac'

on a sign projecting over the pavement confirmed that it was the house he sought. The shop was, of course, closed for the night. He knocked on the door.

A rectangle of reflected light appeared as the door was opened, but it was half blocked out by a massive figure.

'What do you want?' asked a surly voice, in German.

Biggles saw at a glance that the man was a German soldier. This, too, was a contingency for which he was not prepared; but he did not lose his head.

He asked, in French, if Mademoiselle Renee was in, adding that he was a relation.

The German turned and walked back along the passage, shouting something that Biggles could not catch. A moment later an inside door was opened, and he saw a girl emerge. As she walked towards him he began crooning, softly.

Parlez moi d'amour

He saw her hesitate, and then come on quickly. 'Yes, what is it?' she asked in a low voice.

'You are Mademoiselle Renee?'

Oui, m'sieur.'

Biggles felt that it was no use beating about the bush. There was no time for that.

Close the door a little,' he whispered. Then, as she complied, he went on quickly. 'I am a friend a friend of Corporal Price – you understand? Price got back to England; it was he who told me of the tune. I wish to see Marcel Bregard, if he is still here.'

The girl clutched at her breast as though to steady the beating of her heart.

'You are – English?' she breathed.

'Yes. I have come at great risk to fetch the plans, if Marcel is still anxious to dispose of them. Is he still here?'

Yes, but —'

Come in and shut that door; there's a draught!' shouted a harsh voice in German from inside.

have four Boche soldiers billeted on me,' whispered Renee tersely. Marcel is having supper with them. I can't speak to him now. You had better come in.'

She backed into the passage and Biggles followed, imagining that the conversation would be continued there. The last thing he wanted was to find himself in the room with four German soldiers. True, he wore a rainproof over his uniform, but even so it was not much protection.

Inside the passage Renee caught him by the arm. 'It is impossible for me to speak to Marcel while the soldiers are there. We shall have to wait until I can get him alone —'

Biggles started as a door was flung open, flooding the passage with light. On the threshold of the room appeared a man, untidy, unshaven, a man who leaned heavily on two sticks.

'What's going on?' he demanded suspiciously. 'Who's your friend, Renee? Why don't you bring him in?'

Behind the man, who he guessed was Marcel, Biggles could see the German troops lounging round the supper table.

'It's my cousin,' answered Renee loudly enough for everyone to hear.

'Cousin? I didn't know you had one,' flashed back the Frenchman, and Biggles knew from his tone of voice that he was jealous. But it was neither the time nor place for explanations.

'I happened to be passing, so I just called to see how Renee was getting on, that's all,' said Biggles evenly, wondering how he could convey his real message to the man, for to do so with the Germans so near would be to invite disaster. 'I'm not staying,' he added.

Renee looked nervously at Marcel, at the Germans, and then back at Biggles. It was clear that she did not know how to deal with the situation, fraught as it was with peril.

'What's going on out there?' shouted one of the Germans. What's all that whispering about?'

Renee went swiftly towards the outside door, pulling Biggles with her. 'Wait outside,' she breathed urgently. 'Wait under the bedroom window until I can speak with Marcel.'

Feeling that things were going badly, Biggles had no choice but to comply. He dare not risk compromising Renee or Marcel. As the door closed behind him he heard voices muttering on the inside. Standing on the step, he looked quickly up and down the unlighted street, and then slipped into a near-by alley, where he stood, his body pressed against the wall, listening. His brain raced as he tried to decide on a course of action, and after a few moments' reflection he saw that he could not do better than remain where he was. Go out into the street without a pass he dare not.

The moon had long since disappeared for the night. He noticed that the stars had vanished, too, and presently a thin mizzle of rain did nothing to add to his comfort. He was not surprised, though, for he had been aware for some time of an increasing humidity in the air.

Around him the town lay silent, like a city of the dead. Time seemed to stand still, and only his luminous wrist-watch told him the passing

of the hours. Midnight came, and found him sick with anxiety and suspense.

Once he had to cower back in the alley as a patrol marched through the street. In the stillness the heavy tramp of marching feet made enough noise for a hundred men, but there were only six. Out of the gloom they came, six vague phantoms, and into the gloom they disappeared. The footsteps echoed eerily in the silent street as they faded in the distance.

Biggles began to fidget as doubts assailed him. Was it any use waiting? Suppose his machine had been discovered in the field? He had been a long time — much longer than he expected to be. Ought he to. . . . He stiffened as a faint noise reached his ears. It sounded like the squeak of a window being opened.

He stepped out into the street, humming softly the tune of the password song.

The warning came from above, and he broke off abruptly. Looking up he could just make out a pale disk which he knew was a human face.

'Attention!' came a voice, and a small, compact packet thudded at his feet.

He snatched it up and put it in his inside pocket. When he looked up the face had gone.

'Merci,' he said softly. 'We shall not forget you.'

Faintly came the answer. 'Au revoir --bon voyage.' The window squeaked again.

Biggles crept like a shadow acrosss the street and dived into a narrow turning, suddenly aware that the rain had stopped, to be replaced by a haze, thin as yet, but thickening. In a way it helped him through the town, but at the same time it alarmed him when he thought of the flight back. Twice he had

to halt and cower in a doorway as a patrol went past, but he was not challenged, and as soon as he reached open country he broke into a trot.

By the time he reached the field where he had left the machine the fog was so dense that he doubted if it would be possible to take off. To crash, now that he had the plans in his pocket, would, he thought

bitterly, be a sorry ending to his mission. Counting the trees



'We found the machine and didn't know what to make of it,' he explained

beside the road - a precaution he had taken on arrival - he struck off across the field, only to pull up dead as the murmur of voices reached his ears. He did not attempt to deceive himself. Someone had discovered the machine, and the voices denoted that there were at least two people there.

For a little while he hesitated, and reasoned thus: if the men were Germans, then they would remain on guard over the machine, in which case he had nothing to gain by delay.

If, on the other hand, they were Frenchmen, then they ought not to betray him. Taking his pistol in his hand he walked slowly forward.

As he drew near he was relieved to hear that the voices spoke in French. Still, he was taking no chances, and kept firm grip on his pistol.

Two bulky figures loomed in the mist, and he soon saw, as he already suspected, that he had to deal with two French peasants. Not seeing him approach, they sprang away in alarm when he addressed them.

'All right, my friends,' he said quietly. 'I would advise you to go away and forget what you have seen.'

'Nom de Dieu! He's English,' gasped one of the men. 'We found the machine and didn't know what to make of it,' he explained.

'How do things go in England?' asked his companion eagerly.

'Very well indeed - and they will go better if you'll take yourselves off and forget what you have seen here,' returned Biggles. 'The Free Frenchmen in England will soon be marching back. Off you go.'

'You must have been mad to come here,' declared one of the men.

'I'm inclined to agree with you,' answered Biggles drily. The two men insisted on shaking hands with him, and then faded swiftly into the clammy mist.

As soon as they had gone Biggles stood for a moment or two regarding the weather.

Then, having decided what to do, he climbed into his cockpit. To take off in such conditions was, as he knew only too well, asking for trouble. It would be safer to wait. If he heard anyone approaching, then he would have to risk a take-off; if no one came, then he would wait for the weather to clear, as he felt sure it would towards dawn. He was not so optimistic as to hope that it would clear before then. And he was right. Not until the fog was turning grey did it begin to lift.

'I'll give it another five minutes,' he decided.

But before that time was up voices near at hand, and approaching, hastened his departure. It was still not possible to see the boundary of the field, but that could not be helped. He started the engine; then, bracing himself for the ordeal of flying blind, he opened the throttle.

For a thousand feet he roared blindly through the all-enveloping murk, his lips compressed, eyes glued to his instruments, flying as much as anything by the 'feel' of the joystick. Then suddenly the mist grew bright and an instant later he was in clear air, a pale blue sky above and a boundless field of gleaming white below. Swiftly his eyes scanned the atmosphere around him for hostile aircraft, but there was none, and he set a course for home.

He was, he judged, nearing the coast, for everything below was blotted out by the fog, when the Messerschmitts appeared. He did not see where they came from, but suddenly they were there, a dozen of them, far above and diving towards him. Without taking his eyes from them he raced on, easing the stick forward for more speed, for in speed alone lay his only chance of reaching safety. But the advantage of height was with the Messerschmitts, and they overhauled him rapidly. He knew he would have to fight, for the rising sun was beginning to disperse the mist, so that it offered no cover worth taking.

Taking the plans from his pocket, he laid them on his knees, determined to throw them overboard should the worst come to the worst.

The Messerschmitts, diving steeply, closed in, some working round to the right, others to the left, to cut him off. The remainder held straight on, and it was upon the leader of this party that Biggles directed his chief attention, for he would be the first to get within effective range. Indeed, his cannon might be expected to open fire at any moment. When they did, Biggles knew that he would have to turn and fight, or be annihilated.

Meanwhile, he held on his course, knowing that the nearer he got to home the greater became his chance of finding a British patrol to help him. His only sensation was one of annoyance that he had so far succeeded in his mission only to be thwarted at the last moment, for he did not persuade himself that he could fight a dozen Messerschmitts single-handed and get away with it.

Then suddenly to his surprise he saw the Messerschmitts start to

swerve away. This, at such a juncture, was a most unexpected move, but knowing that it would not have occurred without good reason, he looked around for it. Nor was he long discovering it.

Coming down at an angle, across the front of the German planes, was a formation of nine Spitfires.

At first he could hardly believe his eyes, for he could not imagine what they were doing so far over the Channel, but there was no possibility of mistake.

The Spitfires did not pursue the Messerschmitts, but turned towards him, and, as they drew near, his eyes grew round with wonder when he recognized them for his own squadron.

'The fools,' he breathed, with a catch in his voice. The silly fools, coming over here in broad daylight.' Then he laughed.

The Spitfires fell into place behind him, and he led them back to the aerodrome.

Air Commodore Raymond was waiting. His face beamed when Biggles handed him the plans.

Thanks. Did everything go off all right?' he asked. Biggles raised his eyebrows. 'Of course — why not?' 'Well — I thought there might be difficulties.'

'Nothing to speak of,' returned Biggles, walking to meet the pilots running towards him.

He addressed them sternly.

What do you lunatics think you're playing at, wandering about Hun-infested sky at this hour of the morning?'

'We were just waiting for you,' returned Algy, unabashed. 'We guessed you'd be along, and thought maybe you'd need a little help.'

Biggles frowned. How did you know where I'd gone?' 'Ask Sherlock,' grinned Algy, pointing at Toddy. 'He's the man who found the map you plotted your course on.'

-CHAPTER 9

THE COWARD

THE normal duties of Number 666 Squadron consisted of intercepting enemy daylight raiders, and it may have been largely due to Biggles's leadership that no casualties occurred before they did; but by late autumn the strain of long hours at the tremendous altitude at which battles were fought was beginning to tell. Nutty Armand went to hospital with a bullet through his foot, and Tex O'Hara, to his disgust, was kept on the ground, by the M.O.'s orders, with a wrenched shoulder sustained in collision with a tree while trying to bring his Spitfire down after its lateral controls had been shot away.

Added to this, three airmen had been injured by bomb splinters when a deliberate dive-bombing attack had been made on the aerodrome during the absence of the machines.

The fact that this attack had been repeated on two subsequent occasions suggested that the enemy had located the aerodrome. On the other hand, Cuthbert had returned from hospital, and to bring the squadron up to strength came Henry Harcourt.

Henry was, in appearance, a weedy youth with a thin, pale face and thoughtful grey eyes.

His hair was fair and, apparently lacking the strength to support itself, usually hung like a flat wad over his forehead. But his manner was confident, and he had a habit of nodding his head to emphasize his words – which he appeared to choose with great care.

'Oratory, as it was understood by the Athenians, is a lost art,' he declared sadly in the mess on his first evening, when, after a staggering burst of eloquence, his leg had been pulled by Tug Carrington. 'Read Plutarch,' he adjured his hearers earnestly, and you will see where a man can get with no weapon other than his tongue.'

'Try putting your tongue out at a Hun and see where it will get you,' sneered Tug. 'I'll go on saying my piece in this war with a bunch of guns – if it's all the same to you.'

Henry regarded him with compassion. 'As you will,' he said piously.

The following morning Toddy entered Biggles's office and informed him that Henry wished to speak to him.

'If this budding Cicero fondly imagines that we've nothing else to do here but talk, I shall have to disillusion him,' answered Biggles coldly. 'All right, bring him in.'

Henry entered, smiling. Good morning, sir; may I take the liberty of saying how extremely gratifying it is to find you in—'

'All right. You've found me – what about it?' broke in Biggles. 'If you've something to say – say it. I'm busy.'

Henry was not in the least put out – except that he looked at Biggles rather pityingly.

'What I have to say, sir, is this,' he continued evenly. 'In making a cursory perambulation of the station this morning I observed –'

'You mean you saw something? What was it?'

'A small structure obviously provided exclusively for quadrupeds of the porcine genus —'

'In short, you saw a pigsty. What about it?'

'It occurred to me, sir, that on an aerodrome like this there must be a certain number of fragments, unconsumed portions of rations —'

'If you mean scraps, yes, there are plenty. Go ahead.'

'Well, sir, if we acquired a pig, a little pig, and put him in the sty, we could dispose of our garbage and at the same time cause the little pig to develop —'

Biggles nodded. Yes, that's an idea. But who's going to look after it?'

'I will, with pleasure,' declared Henry promptly. 'I have a way with animals,' he added modestly.

'Is that so?' said Biggles, looking hard at him.

Yes, indeed, sir. I will undertake to maintain —'

'You won't overlook that there is a certain amount of flying to be done?'

Certainly not, sir.'

'All right. You have my permission to buy a pig, chargeable to mess funds.'

Thank you, sir.' Henry withdrew, beaming.

Biggles thought no more about the affair until, that night, while the officers were in the ante-room waiting for dinner to be served, strange sounds were heard coming from the direction of the sty, which was situated at the back of the farm-house, the building that had been converted into officers' quarters.

'What on earth is that?' he asked, looking startled.

Before anyone could answer Henry came in. He looked dishevelled, but pleased with himself.

'I've got the little bounder, sir,' he announced to Biggles. 'Bounder?'

You know, sir, the porker.'

'He's got what?' asked Algy in astonishment.

'A pig,' returned Biggles shortly.

'No, not really?' murmured Bertie Lissie, sitting up and taking notice. 'I say, what fun.

Which pig is it?'

Henry frowned. Which pig? Any pig.'

Biggles shrugged his shoulders. 'He wanted one,' he explained.

'I'll bring my goldfish along,' sneered Tug.

'And my little rabbit, look you,' scoffed Taffy.

Say, what is this, a menagerie?' demanded Tex plaintively. Ain't there enough hogs in the sky, without —'

Henry flushed. 'I don't think it's in the best of taste to hold up to ridicule a dumb animal.'

'Dumb?' queried Tex.

Yes – it can't talk.'

Yeah, I'd already got that figgered out,' said Tex slowly. Well, therefore it's dumb.'

'I still don't get it. Do some of your English pigs talk?' Of course not.'

Then what's so remarkable about this one being dumb?' There's nothing remarkable about it.'

Then why make a song about it? It sounds to me like it was just an ordinary hog.'

Henry admitted, reluctantly, that this was correct.

'It's all right,' put in Biggles ; he's going to look after it.'

He was at breakfast the following morning when a loud cry of anger arose from the back of the mess. He recognized Henry's voice. A moment later it was followed by a yell of laughter, which so excited his curiosity that he left the table and went round to see what was going on. He found the squadron officers grouped round the sty, and as they made way for him he beheld a spectacle that brought a smile to his face.

It was the pig, a small white pig. On each side of its little round flanks had been painted the red, white, and blue ring markings such as are carried by service aircraft. Its tail, too, had been adorned with three stripes of red, white, and blue. That these decorations in no way inconvenienced the animal was obvious from the way it stood in the middle of its breakfast, eating with gusto.

'It's a shame!' cried Henry hotly.

Why, what's wrong?' protested Ginger. 'After all, Annie —'

Biggles started. 'Annie 9'

'That's her name, sir,' returned Ginger, pointing at the animal. 'As I was saying, she was bought out of mess funds; we can't afford to lose her. If she escaped now anyone will know where she belongs.'

'I shall wash it off,' declared Henry firmly.

'If the dirty little beast wallows in her grub perhaps it'll wear off,' suggested Tug dispassionately.

'If not, she'll have to grow out of it,' rejoined Biggles. Then, with a change of tone, he went on crisply, 'All right. No more fooling. We leave the ground in ten minutes. I shall be leading the squadron this morning.' He turned to Henry. 'You'll fly with A Flight. If we engage, keep as close to me as you can.'

'Very good, sir,' said Henry meekly.

During the flight that followed, a large enemy formation was encountered, but with the aid of the Hurricanes of 701 Squadron it was broken up. Five of the enemy machines were shot down, two falling to Biggles's guns, which, Algy thought, should have satisfied him. But there was a hard expression on his face as he got out of his machine. There was, too, an unusual restraint among the officers as they made their way slowly to the mess, talking in low tones.

'Harcourt, I want a word with you,' Biggles told Henry, who, looking rather pale, was standing a little apart from the others. 'Come into the office.'

Henry followed him through the door.

As soon as they were inside Biggles turned mildly accusing eyes on the new pilot's face.

'In the mix-up this morning, Harcourt, it seemed to me that you – shall we say – did not quite pull your weight? I noticed you on the outskirts of the dogfight. Of course, in a show of that sort it's hard to see just what is happening, and I may have been wrong. It was your first big show?'

Yes, sir.' Henry seemed to speak with difficulty.

'All right. In that case we'll say no more about it.' Biggles rested a fatherly hand on Henry's shoulder. 'If you feel – er – that you're not quite up to it, tell me. It's better that way. There's no hurry – think it over. That's all.'

Henry, who was biting his lip, saluted and went out. *toddy came in with a bustle that seemed unnecessary. You heard what I told that boy?' said piggies quietly. 'Yes, sir.'

Biggles drew a deep breath. 'I may be wrong; indeed, I hope I am; but I'm afraid he has only just realized the sort of job he has taken on. We shall see.'

Looking through the window he saw the officers standing in little groups, talking with unusual earnestness. He recognized the signs, and knew only too well what they were talking about. He went over to them.

Don't let him suspect you noticed anything,' he said meaningly. 'It was

his first show, remember. He may find his feet presently – they do sometimes.'

'If he'd had his family wiped out, like I —' began Tug. Biggles cut him short. 'All right, Carrington, that's enough.'

Not everyone is made of the same stuff, you know. Where is Harcourt now?'

'I saw him go across to his quarters,' said Ginger.

Biggles stroked his chin thoughtfully. 'It might be a good thing if you went and had a word with him,' he suggested. 'Be careful. In the end he'll have to work the thing out for himself, but at this moment a little encouragement may help. Criticism would be fatal.'

Ginger nodded, and following Henry to his room, found him lying face downwards on his bed.

'What's the matter - tired?' began Ginger cheerfully.

Henry turned a pale face towards him. The rims of his eyes were red. 'You know it isn't that,' he said dully. 'I funk'd it - you needn't tell me.'

Ginger laughed loudly. Rot!'

Henry shook his head. 'You can't deceive me. I can't even deceive myself,' he muttered bitterly. 'When those guns started I was - afraid.'

'Of course you were. So was I. So were we all,' declared Ginger. 'We just kid ourselves that we're not. Who wouldn't be? You'll be all right when you've done one or two more shows. Come on, snap out of it. Let's go and call on Annie.'

Henry got up and followed Ginger round to the sty.

Ginger watched him curiously, and with compassion, as he went into the sty and, sitting on the edge of the feeding trough, tweaked the piglet's ear, a demonstration of affection which the animal appeared to appreciate, for it rested its nose on his knee, grunting contentedly. It seemed that Henry had, as he had claimed, a way with animals.

'A good pair,' breathed a voice in Ginger's ear.

Turning, he found himself face to face with Tug, who was watching the scene with frank disgust.

'Never be in a hurry to judge people,' murmured Ginger sagely, as he took Tug by the arm and led him away.

The following morning, as Biggles went out to take the squadron in the air, he noticed that one machine was missing. 'Who's absent?' he asked Toddy tersely.

'Harcourt, sir.'

'Where is he?'

'He's reported sick.' 'Sick? With what?'

Toddy coughed. 'Toothache, he says.'

Biggles bit his lip. 'He may or may not have got toothache, but I'll warrant he's got a heartache,' he said. 'Poor devil!'

'What shall I do, sir - post him back to the depot?'

Biggles gazed across the aerodrome. 'I wouldn't be in a hurry,' he advised. 'Let's wait until we hear what the doctor has to say. I believe in giving these lads every chance. We old hands are tough, but in my early days I remember being very, very frightened. Give him a chance.'

'Very good, sir.'

Biggles got into his machine and the eight Spitfires roared into the air to patrol their allotted zone.

It was a perfect flying day, without a cloud in the sky, the kind of day when, from above, the earth seems to smile; the kind of day, as Biggles knew, that the enemy, taking advantage of the high visibility, would be likely to come over in force. Nor was he mistaken. He had just levelled out at twenty-two thousand feet when a radio signal from Headquarters, Fighter Command, warned him that a big formation of heavy bombers, accompanied by dive bombers and a fighter escort, was approaching the Thames Estuary.

A few minutes later he could see the sparks of the archie barrage flashing round a long cluster of tiny specks, looking from the distance for all the world like midges in a summer sky. Judging that they were about the same height as himself, he altered his course slightly and sped on to intercept them.

To the watcher on the ground one dogfight is much like-another, the successive moves following each other with almost monotonous regularity. But to the airman, who sees the thing from close range, there is always something, only a trifling incident perhaps, to make one combat different from another.

Biggles was studying the enemy's dispositions, seeking the weakest spot against which to launch his attack, when the Messerschmitts guarding the bombers' nearest flank turned towards him, obviously intending to keep him at a distance. Without so much as a glance behind to see if the others were following, for he knew they would, he held straight on, watching the distance closely, knowing from experience the range at which the Messerschmitt pilots would probably open fire with their cannon. A split second before such a range was reached he dived suddenly, holding his own fire until he could hope to use his eight machine-guns with good effect. At the end the opposing machines seemed to leap towards each other, and in another moment the sky was the scene of a whirling melee.

Biggles's face set in hard lines, for he realized perfectly well that he had taken on rather more than prudence justified - not that prudence takes much part in a dogfight. There were at least twenty Messerschmitts, and others were leaving the bombers to increase the odds against his own eight machines. Between quick bursts of shooting he scanned the sky anxiously for reinforcements, hoping that Wilks's Hurricanes, which should be in the district, might show up. But there was no sign of them. And all the while he was working his way through the Messerschmitts to get at the bombers; the latter had maintained their positions as they forged on towards their objective, which he had no doubt was London.

To describe in detail the battle that now ensued would necessarily involve much repetition. Words, too, would lag behind the speed of the action.

From such a cloud of machines it was not easy to single one out for individual attack, but seeing a Messerschmitt firing at him Biggles accepted the challenge. For a full minute the two machines spun dizzily round each other; then the Messerschmitt burst into flames. He saw another machine of the same type going down minus a wing, but who shot it down he did not know. A swift survey of the atmosphere revealed five Spitfires. Two had gone. But the Messerschmitts were not so numerous as they had been.

The fight went on. It was the most bitterly contested in all Biggles's

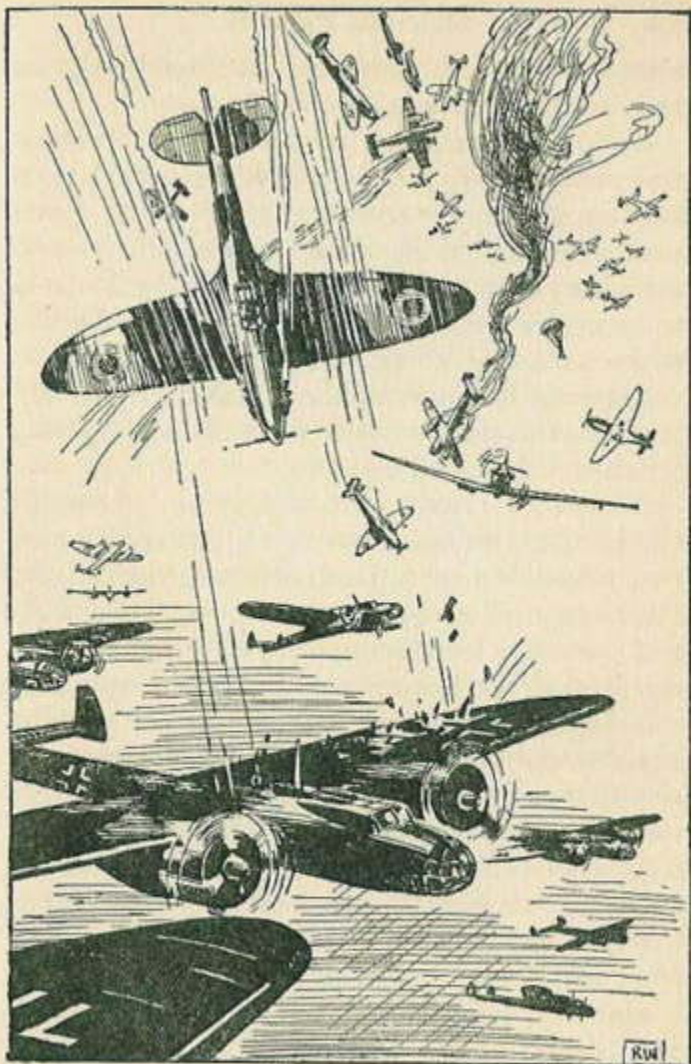
experience, machines of both sides hurtling round and round at frenzied speed, sometimes missing each other by inches, neither side giving way. He narrowly escaped collision with a man dangling on the end of a parachute. Who he was, or to which side he belonged, he did not know. He had no time to look. It was dodge and dodge again. Shooting was of the wildest snapshot description. Every now and then an incident, without beginning and without end, like a short length of news-reel on a screen, photographed itself vividly on his brain. He saw Ferocity Ferris with guns belching not ten feet from a Messerschmitt cockpit. . . . Angus Mackail, easily recognized by his Glengarry, looping in the wake of another enemy machine, as if tied to it. . . . Taffy Hughes, spinning on a wing-tip as he handled his guns like a hose pipe, drawing his fire across something outside Biggles's view . . . Bertie Lissie, pulling his machine up in a fantastic stalling turn to avoid a plunging Spitfire. . . and so it went on.

Snatching an opportunity, Biggles looked about him to see what had happened to the bombers. They were still going on in perfect formation. Fighting his way through the milling machines, he raced after them. A shadow made him flinch, but an instant later he saw it was another Spitfire - Algy's. He went on, diving for more speed, knowing that at all costs he must stop the bombers.

His machine shuddered as a burst of bullets struck it in the rear. As he looked back he caught sight of Algy, whirling as if on a pivot, flecks of orange flame jumping from his guns as

he fired at something over Biggles's head. Looking up he caught a fleeting glimpse of a Messerschmitt pilot just abandoning his machine.

'Nice shooting,' murmured Biggles, his eyes smiling across space at Algy, who was now going on after the bombers, which were still some way ahead. He resumed the pursuit, and as he watched the formation ahead he saw a remarkable sight, an incident so spectacular that his lips parted with wonder. He had never seen anything quite like it.



The Spitfire stood vertically on its nose and went down like a torpedo

A machine had appeared in the sky immediately over the bombers — perhaps a thousand feet above.

It was a Spitfire. Biggles just had time to think, 'Who's that? Where has he popped up from?' when the Spitfire stood vertically on its nose and went down like a torpedo, straight towards the middle of the bomber formation.

Biggles's lips went dry. At first he concluded that the Spitfire pilot had been hit, and was either dead or unconscious, for no sane pilot would behave in such a way. While there was still time for the machine to pull out he hoped that it would do so; and, indeed, he watched for it to do so; but it did not, and when collision appeared inevitable he braced himself instinctively for the shock of the frightful crash that must occur.

Instead, he was dumbfounded to see the Spitfire go right through the enemy formation, like a stone falling through a flock of birds. By what miracle it missed hitting one of the bombers in its headlong passage he could not imagine.

But the affair was not yet over. By this time he was convinced that only a dead or unconscious man could be in the cockpit of the Spitfire. What was his amazement, then, to see the British machine pull out of its dive at a speed calculated to strip the wings from the fuselage, and then, without a pause, shoot up again like a rocket.

Biggles's lips formed the words, 'He's mad.' And this was no idle observation. It was the only conclusion he could reach.

Meanwhile things were happening. Some of the bombers were beginning to swerve. One or two, evidently new to the business, giving way to the instinct of self-preservation, had gone wide and seemed to lose themselves. Before they could rejoin their formation the Spitfire was in the middle of it, causing it to break in the middle. More machines skidded away, and in a moment or two the formation was in confusion. Sparks were flashing from the muzzles of many guns, but it seemed to Biggles that the bombers stood a better chance of hitting each other than of hitting the lone British machine. One bomber turned away and started gliding down; another followed it, smoke pouring from its tail. The crew toppled out like ripe apples dropping off a tree.

By this time Biggles himself was in range. He sent a bomber reeling, with strips of metal flying from its fuselage. He pulled his nose round to another, and then had to kick his rudder-bar violently to avoid collision as the unknown Spitfire, flying back over its course, came tearing through the middle of the enemy machines. It missed him by inches.

Biggles went in and fired again, although he had very little ammunition left. What became of the lone Spitfire he did not see. In fact, when the bombers started to turn, and he saw the reason, he

forgot all about it. Twelve Hurricanes, closely followed by seven Spitfires, had appeared out of the blue, and it was clear that the tide of the battle had turned. The bombers unloaded their bombs and made for home. Biggles fired his remaining ammunition at one of them, and then started to glide down. He could do no good by remaining. But he did not mind, for the enemy machines were now scattered all over the sky, and he felt that he could safely leave them to the newcomers.

Three Spitfires joined him on the way home, one being Mgy's, and two others were already on the aerodrome when he got back.

As soon as he had taxied in he jumped down, and ran to meet Algy.

'That Was pretty hot going,' he greeted him, groping for his cigarette case.

'Hot! You're telling me,' grunted Algy, stretching his stiff limbs. 'Did you see that crazy Spitfire?'

Biggles burst out laughing. Did I see it? Did you ever see such a sight in your life? I've seen some daft flying in my time, but I've never seen anything quite like that. But I must give the fellow his due, whoever he was. There must have been forty bombers in that mob, and he scattered them like a dog barging into a flock of sheep. He must have been off his ---'

He broke off as another Spitfire came gliding in. It was a horrible sight. As much of its fabric as remained on the wings seemed to be trailing loose. Its wheels were half lowered, but had jammed at an angle. It was riddled with bullet holes.

'Look out!' shouted Algy, jumping clear.

The machine struck the ground, bounced once or twice, and skidded to a standstill.

Biggles raised a hand to his forehead. Suffering Mike! That's Harcourt's machine!' he cried in a strangled voice. 'Who's flying it?'

Henry got out - or rather fell out. He staggered about for a bit like a sailor thrown out of a grog shop, and then limped towards the spellbound spectators. There was blood on his face, but he was grinning foolishly.

For a moment Biggles was speechless. His lips moved, but no sound came. Then he gasped. Was that you - up there -- you - flinging yourself about in that mob — ?'

Henry nodded. Yes, it was me,' he confessed. 'But what - what - what on earth came over you?'

The smile faded from Henry's face. It set in hard lines. 'Come with me, sir, and I'll show you,' he said.

Wonderingly the others followed him to the pigsty - or it would be more correct to say the place where the pigsty had been. For instead of the sty there yawned only a deep round hole. Of pig or sty there was no sign.

What's happened here?' cried Biggles.

Toddy ran up. 'Just after you took off a dive bomber came in low and plastered us. He dropped a stick of bombs, but this was the only one that did any damage.'

'Damage,' grated Henry. 'The swine killed Annie - my little Annie.'

Understanding dawned in Biggles's eyes. 'I see,' he said.

'I went up to avenge her,' burst out Henry. Revenge! Revenge is sweet. I'll get the hound who killed my little Annie if I have to shoot every Hun out of the sky.'

Biggles leaned against the mess wall and laughed weakly.

Henry pointed an accusing finger at him. 'That's right, laugh,' he cried bitterly. 'A lot you care —' He broke off as a ramshackle motor-car appeared round the corner and nearly ran him down. A man, a farmer by his clothes, alighted.

'Have you gentlemen lost anything?' he inquired politely. 'I ask because I saw this tearing across my land about half an hour ago. My farm adjoins your aerodrome, you know. I had a job to catch her, but seeing her spots I thought she must belong to you.' He pointed to the car, and the others turned to see what he had brought.

Peering through a net in the back of the vehicle, looking very scared and pleased to be home, was Annie.

THE FLYING SPY

BIGGLES spotted the other Spitfire as he was coming home from a short patrol, made primarily to test the weather conditions, which were far from good.

'He's in a hurry, whoever he is,' he reflected, as he watched the other Spitfire. As it drew near he noted that it was not one of his own squadron machines — as he thought it might be — nor did he recognize the unit markings on the fuselage.

'There must be a new squadron hereabouts,' he mused, noting with mild surprise that the newcomer tagged on behind him with the apparent intention of following him home... He moved his rudder-bar slightly so that he could get a better view of the other machine, and, examining it closely, observed that a cluster of holes had been punched in an irregular pattern through the engine cowling. There were similar holes just behind the cockpit, and through the tail.

'No wonder he was glad to find a pal,' murmured Biggles.

As he put the Spitfire on the aerodrome the other machine landed near him. The pilot, whom Biggles noted was a Flight Lieutenant, got out and waved a greeting.

'Pity you didn't make a better job of it,' remarked Biggles. The stranger looked puzzled. '

How so?'

'I mean,. if you could have got a few more holes through your machine it would have made a useful sieve.'

The other grinned. 'I'll give it the cook for a colander,' he returned, removing his flying cap carefully and looking ruefully at a jagged rent in the ear-flap.

Biggles whistled softly. My word! If that one had been any closer it would have given you a headache,' he exclaimed.

'It's given me a headache as it is,' answered the stranger, feeling the side of his head gingerly, where a red weal, just below the ear, told its own story.

'Come across to the mess and have a drink?' invited Biggles. 'By the

way, my name's Bigglesworth, of 666. This is where we live.'

'Mine's Lakers, of 298.'

'Where do you hang out ?' asked Biggles. 'I can't remember seeing any of your machines in these parts.'

'No,' was the reply. 'We're down in Sussex, near Marley. We've been doing escort duties with the day bombers who have been operating against the invasion ports. We haven't been at Marley very long.'

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'Marley ?' echoed Biggles thoughtfully. 'That's some way

• from here. How do you happen to be so far from home?'

'Just plain curiosity I guess. As a matter of fact, I'm not really on duty today. I went up to do a test, and while I was up I thought I'd have a look at the narrow end of the 'Channel.'

Biggles was regarding the holes in the machine with a professional eye, 'Quite,' he said slowly. 'But how did you get in this mess?'

A

Lakers laughed. 'Serves me right, I suppose,' he replied. 'As a matter of fact, I haven't got a Hun yet, so I thought I'd try to get one. I found one, but he was too good for me.'

Not so good,' commented- Biggles. 'You'd better fly with us for a bit and learn how to do it,' he bantered. 'Come along; as you're so far from home no doubt you'd like some lunch.'

Sure! I can do with a bite.'

'You're a Canadian, aren't you?' went on Biggles, as they walked towards the officers'

mess.

'Yes. What made you think that?'

'People who say 'sure' and I guess' usually bring it with them from the other side of the Atlantic. Hullo, here comes Algy Lacey. He's a good scout - one of my Flight Commanders. You ought to know him.' He

made the necessary introductions.

Algy smiled. 'Glad to meet you,' he said. Then, to Biggles, 'How did you get on ?'

All right - but there was nothing doing. I didn't see a Hun. I fancy Lakers kept them all to himself; his machine's got as many holes in it as a petrol filter.' He turned to the visitor.

What exactly happened, Lakers?'

In the mess Lakers told his story.

'After I left the aerodrome this morning I headed due east for a time, following the coast.

I didn't see a soul, which got a bit boring, so I edged a bit nearer to France to see if the Huns are as thick there as you fellows pretend. For a time I didn't see anyone, except an occasional Hudson on reconnaissance, and then, suddenly, five or six Messerschmitts piled on top of me. I was only about a mile from the English coast, which didn't seem very far, but I guess the Huns spotted me just as I spotted them, for as I turned they turned.

'I shan't forget the next five minutes in a hurry,' continued Lakers. 'At first I put my nose down and streaked over the coast, trying to outdistance them. In other words, I ran away, and I don't mind admitting it. You fellows might think it's good fun taking on half a dozen Huns at once - but I know my limitations. Well, the Huns kept pace with me, and managed to head me off. Then more Huns came down from the north. That did it. I got the wind up properly, and just made a wild rush for it. Somehow I managed to get through, but I must have been lucky. I didn't stop till I saw you in the distance - you may have noticed that I made for you flat out?'

'What do you suppose you're flying that kite for?' It was Tug Carrington who spoke, and his voice seemed to bristle with criticism.

Lakers shrugged his shoulders. 'To fight, I suppose.'

'You only suppose? You won't get many Huns if you go on like you did this morning,'

returned Tug frostily.

'Oh, give him a chance,' broke in Biggles. 'He says himself he hasn't been on the job very long. Do you really want to get a Hun?' he went on, turning to Lakers.

'I should say I do!'

'Then suppose we go over together this afternoon and have a look round - that is, you, Lacey, and myself? I've got to do a patrol, anyway.'

'That's fine! But don't let me butt in on —'

'Oh, it's a pleasure. We always try to do the best we can for our guests, don't we, Algy?'

'Certainly.'

Well, that suits me,' declared Lakers. 'Have a cigarette?' He took a cigarette case from his pocket and offered it. Biggles took it, removed a cigarette, and examined the case with interest. It was a flat one, solid gold, slightly bent to fit the pocket. Engraved across the corner were the initials F.T.L.

'Nice case,' Biggles observed, handing it back to its owner. He glanced at his watch. '

Excuse me, but I've got a little job to do in the office. I shan't be long. You'd better go in and get some lunch. About this trip this afternoon - suppose we leave the ground at three?'

Suits me,' agreed Lakers.

After lunch, leaving Lakers with his coffee, Biggles touched Algy on the arm and left the room.

'What's the idea?' inquired Algy, as soon as they were outside.

'I'll show you,' returned Biggles, and walked towards the hangars. On the way, at a point where a hedge came near to the path, he stopped to break off a thin straight ash stick, which he trimmed of its leaves as he walked along.

'Are you going to ride a horse or something?' inquired Algy, regarding this unusual procedure with interest.

Biggles shook his head. 'At the moment I'm just riding a hunch,' he replied. 'Wait a minute and I'll show you.'

Reaching the sheds, he went straight to the visiting Spitfire. Some mechanics were working on it, but he dismissed them. 'Now,' he said to Algy, as soon as the men had gone, 'I want you to take a good look at those bullet holes near the cockpit. Can you see anything peculiar about them?'

Algy threw him a glance of frank amazement, and then examined the holes carefully.

'No, I'm dashed if I can see anything unusual about them,' he declared, after he had finished his scrutiny. 'They look like good, honest bullet holes to me.'

'Do you remember, when we were having lunch, I asked Lakers if he'd been under fire before this morning? I asked him the direct question.'

'Yes, I remember perfectly. He said no.'

'Then what do you make of this?'

Biggles inserted the ash stick in a hole on one side of the fuselage and pushed it on until the point rested in the corresponding hole on the opposite side, where the bullet had emerged.

'I still don't see what you're getting at,' murmured Algy. Can you tell me how a bullet could pass along a path now

indicated by that stick without touching the pilot? It would go through his thigh, wouldn't it? It couldn't possibly miss hint entirely, could it?'

'No, it certainly could not,' agreed Algy slowly.

'Did you notice Lakers limping, or bleeding, or mentioning being hit? You didn't? Well, I'm as certain as I stand here that Lakers wasn't in the cockpit of that machine when those bullets were fired.'

What on earth made you spot that?' gasped Algy.

'You needn't flatter me on account of my eyesight, but I'm not entirely a fool, I hope. I was looking at those holes before Lakers told his story. At first I thought he was just piling on the agony - some fellows talk like that, you know. But let us pass on. This fellow says his name is Lakers.'

'Have you any reason to suppose that it isn't?'

'Yes, I have a very good reason. You see, I happen to know Lakers personally. I was talking to him in the Club only about a month ago.'

'There might be two Lakers.'

'There might. But it would be a thundering funny coincidence, wouldn't it, if they both had the same initials - F.T.L. - and the same identical cigarette case, with the initials engraved in the same way in the same place?'

Algy stared. 'The same cigarette case?' he echoed.

'That's what I said. Nobody's going to make me believe that there are two such cigarette cases in the world, both belonging to fellows named Lakers, who happen to have the same initials. There's a limit to my imagination. It happens that today was not the first time that I have seen the case which that fellow is now flaunting. Obviously something is wrong somewhere. I don't like mysteries - they worry me.'

'What do you think?' asked Algy in a low voice.

'I'll tell you what I think. I think that fellow who is now in the mess calling himself Lakers deliberately produced that cigarette case to prove, by suggestion, in case there should be any doubt, that his name is Lakers. I'm prepared to swear that case belonged to Frank Lakers. Why, we played bridge with it lying on the table. I even admired it, and he told me it was a twenty-first birthday present from his father.'

Algy stared. 'Have you finished giving me shocks?'

'Not quite. Just turn this over in your mind and see if it suggests anything to you. Frank Lakers is dead. He went out on a patrol job near the French coast one day last week, and didn't come back. He was seen to crash - in France - near Calais.'

'How on earth do you know that?'

'Because I made it my business to ring up the Air Ministry just now. That's where I went when I disappeared just before lunch.'

'I see. Then what do you think - now?'

'I'll tell you. I think that Frank Lakers is either in a German prison hospital, or else staring up at the sky through six feet of Flanders mud. What's this fellow doing with his cigarette case? I should say he has

got it as proof of identity in case the question arises; and it wouldn't surprise me if he had letters addressed to Lakers in his pocket, too. Then what is he doing here, far away from his allegi6aerodrome ? Work it out for yourself.'

'You think - he's a spy?'

What else can we think? I don't want to appear to have a spy complex, but - well, that's what it looks like to me. Everything points to this fellow being a German agent'

'He speaks English well.'

'That's nothing to go by. There are hundreds of German-Americans who speak English as well as we do. On the other hand, of course, there's just a chance that he is a British agent up to some game. Funny things happen in war.'

'Can't you ring up the Air Ministry and find out?'

'And to be told to attend to my own business? In any case the fellow will have gone before our people can do anything, and we daren't detain him on mere suspicion.'

'Then what are we going to do about it? We can't just let him go.'

'I'm going to plant a trap,' said Biggles. 'If he is who and what he says he is he will come on this trip this afternoon; if he isn't, then he won't - at least, I can't imagine him shooting down an enemy machine if he's a Hun himself.'

'What is he doing here do you suppose?'

'I should say he's out to collect all the information he can, using a captured machine.'

Having got it, he'll try to get back to where he came from. On the table in the map-room I've put a map; it shows all the Fighter Command aerodromes - but not in the tight places. I want you to go back to the mess and suggest to Lakers that it might be a good thing if he walked along to the map-room and ascertained the position of this aerodrome in relation to his own. Show him the room, and leave him there. He'll see the map, and if he's what we think he is he'll try to get away with it, because it would look like a first-class prize to take to Germany. If he does pinch it, his next idea will bop get away as quickly as he can. In other words, if he's on the level he'll go back to

the mess; if he isn't he'll make for his machine and take off.'

But what about you?' asked Algy. 'Won't he wonder where you are and what you're doing? What shall I tell him?'

'Tell him that I've had an urgent call from Wing, and may be late back. Suggest to him that our proposed trip may have to be postponed for a little while. As a matter of fact I shall be in the air, high up, watching the aerodrome. You will watch him, and if he makes a break for it run out and wave a towel in front of the mess.

That will tell me that he has left the ground. I shall be up topsides waiting for him. I shall suggest to him by certain methods that I want him to come back with me. If he doesn't —

well, it'll be his funeral. Have you got that clear?'

'Absolutely.'

Good. Then I'll get off.'

Algy watched Biggles climb into his machine and take off, and then, deep in thought, walked slowly back to the mess. Lakers was still in conversation with the officers who were not on duty.

The man seemed so absolutely at home, so self-possessed and natural in his speech and movements, that a sudden doubt assailed Algy. Suppose Biggles had made a mistake?

Spy scares were common in every service, he knew, but that spies operated anywhere and everywhere could not be denied, and some of them with amazing effrontery. He watched the suspected officer closely for some sign or slip that might betray him; but he watched in vain.

'Well, there's no point in wasting time,' he decided, and touched Lakers on the arm.

Oh, Lakers,' he said, 'I've a message for you from the C.O. He's had to go off on a job and may* late back, so this proposed show of ours may have to wait for a little while. He will probably be back not later than half-past three, but, in the meantime, he suggests that you have a look round the map-room, so that if you got separated from us during the show you'd know your way back — either to here, or to your own aerodrome.'

'I see,' answered Lakers. 'That's not a bad idea. I think I'll follow his advice.'

He picked up his flying kit and threw it over his arm. Algy raised his eyebrows. 'You won't want those, will you?'

'I may as well take them along,' replied Lakers coolly. 'I don't think too much of this weather,' he went on, looking under his hand towards the horizon where dark clouds were rising. 'It looks to me like thunder coming up. If it comes this way I may push along home without waiting for Bigglesworth to come back. I don't want to get hung up here for the night, and we can postpone the show until another day if necessary.'

Algy's heart missed a beat, for it began to look as if Biggles was right.

O.K.,' he said. 'You do just as you like. I'll show you the map-room.'

Together they walked across to the building.

'Here we are,' resumed Algy, glancing at the map that had been purposely left on the table. 'I'll stroll back to the mess if it's all the same to you. Let me know if I can be of any help.'

'I will — thanks.'

Algy left the room, closing the door behind him, and passed the window as if he was returning to the mess. But as soon as he was out of sight he doubled back and peeped in.

Lakers was bending over the map, studying it carefully. He made a note or calculation on the margin, folded the map, and then looked at the sky. For a little while he regarded it thoughtfully, and then, as if suddenly making up his mind, he put the map in his pocket, picked up his flying kit, and left the room.

Algy watched him walk straight to his machine. The engine started, and the Spitfire began to taxi slowly into position for a take-off.

Algy waited for no more. He rushed into the wash-house, tore a towel from its peg, then darted back into the open waving it above his head. High up in the sky he could just make out Biggles's Spitfire, circling as it awaited the signal.

'By gosh, he was right!' muttered Algy, as Lakers took off and headed towards the south.

The topmost Spitfire at once banked round to follow it.

'Is that Lakers taking off?' said a voice at his elbow. Algy spun round on his heel and saw that it was Bertie who had spoken.

'Yes,' he answered quickly.

'Bad show about his brother.'

'Whose brother?'

'Lakers's brother, of course.'

Algy puckered his forehead in an effort to understand. Lakers's brother?' he repeated foolishly.

Bertie stared at him through his monocle. 'What's the matter with you?' he inquired. 'I simply said it was a bad show about his brother being killed. He told me about it while you and Biggles were out of the room.'

Algy staggered. 'What did he tell you?' he gasped.

'He said that his brother, Frank Lakers, had just been killed. They were both in the same squadron. That's his brother's cigarette case he's got; he borrowed it from him the very day before he went west - that's how he came to tell me about it. The odd thing was, he would have been with his brother, and probably gone west at the same time, but for the fact that he'd lent his machine to another fellow just before the show. He got it pretty badly shot about, too, but came off with nothing worse than a bullet through the leg. The machine hasn't been repaired yet - hi! What's wrong with you?'

But Algy wasn't listening. Understanding of the whole situation flooded his brain like a spotlight, and he ran like a madman towards his machine, praying that he might be in time to prevent a tragedy.

Biggles, sitting in his cockpit ten thousand feet above the aerodrome, stiffened suddenly when he saw Algy's signal, and his jaw set grimly as he picked out the Spitfire just leaving the aerodrome.

So he's making a bolt for it, is he?' he mused. 'I'm afraid he's got a shock coming to him.'

He swung round, following the same course as the lower Spitfire, which was now climbing towards the south.

But a haze was forming under the atmospheric pressure of the advancing storm, and the lower machine was no more than an indistinct grey shadow. Biggles, suddenly aware that he might lose his man after all, pushed the joystick forward and raced down in pursuit.

The drone of his engine became a shrill wail as the whirling airscrew bit into the air. The distance between the two machines closed rapidly.

At five thousand feet Biggles flattened out, only a few hundred feet above and behind his quarry, which was still heading towards the south. He could see the pilot's head clearly; he appeared to be looking at the ground, first over one side of his machine and then over the other. Not once did he look behind him, and Biggles smiled grimly as he went nearer, intending to cut the Spitfire off and force it to return. If Lakers refused -

well, it was going to be just too bad.

At that moment Lakers looked back over his shoulder.

For one fleeting instant Biggles stared into his face, and then moved like lightning, for the Spitfire had spun round, its nose tilted upwards, and sent a stream of bullets glittering past Biggles's wing-tip.

Biggles kicked out his right foot and flung the control-stick over in a frantic turn. The attack was unexpected, but

he did not lose his head. Nor did he take his eyes off Lakers for a moment. As quick as thought he brought his machine back on its course, and took the other Spitfire in his sights.

At that moment Lakers was within an ace of death; but Biggles did not fire. As his hand touched the button for the fatal burst his head jerked up as something flashed across his sights between him and his target. It was a Messerschmitt. From its fuselage a streamer of orange flame swirled aft.

For the next three seconds events moved more swiftly than they can be described; they moved as quickly as Biggles's brain could act and adjust itself to a new set of conditions, conditions that completely revolutionized his preconceived ideas. After the first shock of seeing the Messerschmitt he looked up in the direction whence it had come, and saw five more machines of the same type pouring down in a ragged formation.

He realized instantly that Lakers had not fired at him, as he had at first supposed, but at the leader of the Nazi planes, and had got him, by brilliant shooting, at the first burst.

Lakers had shot down a Hun!

It meant that something was wrong somewhere, but there was no time to work it out now. Where was Lakers? He found him, actually in front of him, nose tilted upwards, taking the diving Huns head-on.

Biggles roared up alongside, and his lips parted in a smile as he saw something else.

Roaring down behind the enemy machines, at a speed that threatened to take its wings off, was another Spitfire.

For perhaps two seconds the machines held their relative positions — the two lower Spitfires side by side, facing the five diving Huns, and the other Spitfire coming down like an arrow behind them. Then, in a flash, the whole thing collapsed into a whirling dogfight, a milling vortex, as the

Messerschmitts pulled out of their dive; that is, all except the last one, which continued its dive straight into the ground. The odds were now three against four. Biggles smiled grimly.

It is almost impossible to recall the actual moves made in an aerial dogfight; the whole thing resolves itself into a series of disjointed impressions. Biggles took one of the dark machines in his sights, fired and swerved as he heard bullets hitting his own machine. He felt, rather than saw, the wheels of another machine whizz past his head, but whether friend or foe he did not know. A Messerschmitt, with a Spitfire apparently tied to its tail by an invisible cord, tore across his nose. Another Spitfire was going down in a steep side-slip with white vapour streaming from its engine. Another Messerschmitt floated into his sights; he fired again, and saw it jerk upwards, an almost certain sign that the pilot had been hit. There was no time to watch it; instead, he snatched a swift glance over his shoulder for danger, but the air was clear. Turning, he was just in time to see two Messerschmitts vanishing into the haze. Below, two ghastly bonfires, towards which people were running, poured clouds of smoke into the air. Near them was a Spitfire, cocked up on its nose; some troops were already helping the pilot from his seat. Another Spitfire was circling low down; it climbed to meet him, and he confirmed, as he already suspected, that it was Algy's machine.

So it's Lakers on the ground,' he reflected. 'And Lakers had fought against the Huns.' He couldn't understand it. Not a little worried, he headed back to the aerodrome.

Landing, he ran to the Squadron Office. 'Have you had any phone messages?' he asked Toddy tersely.

'Were you in that mix-up just now over the Downs?' 'Yes, it was me and Algy — and Lakers; you know, the

fellow who dropped in to lunch. He's down. Is he hurt?' 'No. Shaken a bit, that's all.'

'Has he gone to hospital?'

'No, he's on his way back here in a car.'

Biggles went outside and met Algy, who had just got out of his machine.

Algy was pale. 'Is he all right?' he asked anxiously. 'If you mean Lakers - yes.'

Thank God! My word, Biggles, you nearly boobed that time!

So it seems. But what do you know about it?'

'It's Lakers's brother - I mean, this fellow is the brother of the chap you knew.'

'Brother!' ejaculated Biggles.

'Yes, I'll tell you all about it —'

'Shut up - here he comes. Don't, for the love of Mike, say anything about this spy business.'

Lakers jumped out of the car that had pulled up on the road and hurried towards them.

Say, I guess I've got to thank you for helping me to get that Hun,' he cried.

'Don't thank me,' replied Biggles. 'Thank your lucky star. By the way, what made you push off as you did, without waiting for me to come back?'

Lakers jerked his thumb towards the darkening sky. I thought I'd better try to get home before the storm broke.'

'You pinched a map out of the map-room,' Algy accused him.

'Yes, I know I did,' replied Lakers frankly. I thought I'd better borrow it to make sure of finding my way home. I intended bringing it back tomorrow - it would have been an excuse to come and see you again. By the way, did I hear you say something just now about a spy? I thought I just caught the word.'

'Yes, you did,' replied Biggles. 'But it was only a rumour.'

CHAPTER

THE RECORD BREAKERS

To some people the business of shooting down a hostile aeroplane may seem a comparatively simple matter. A fellow accustomed to potting at rabbits, knowing that the modern fighting aircraft is fitted with multiple machine-guns capable of spitting bullets at the rate of one hundred and fifty rounds a second, may be pardoned for wondering how a pilot ever misses his mark. In actual fact, to sit in a vehicle travelling at something over three hundred miles an hour, and hit a target travelling at the same speed in another direction, is one of the most difficult things in the world. In the First Great War there were plenty of pilots who fired thousands of rounds of ammunition without hitting anything more tangible than the atmosphere; consequently, a gasp of amazement went up when it was learned that a certain Captain Trollope had set up a record by shooting down six enemy planes in one day - a record which, while it was equalled, remained unbroken until the end of the war.

These facts were, of course, well known to the officers of Biggles's Squadron, who, being professionally interested, often discussed the prospects of a new record being set up.

Now it happened that during a spell of bad weather this very subject was being debated when Squadron Leader Wilkinson, of 701 Squadron, with eight Hurricanes behind him, landed on Biggles's aerodrome. They had, it transpired, attempted a patrol, but ice-forming conditions, rapidly getting worse, had made a landing advisable if not imperative. So they had come down at the nearest aerodrome, and announced their intention of waiting for the weather to improve. Gathered around the fire, the original debate was resumed, and naturally the Hurricane pilots joined in the

conversation.

Squadron Leader Wilkinson, better known as Wilks, took the view that, although six victories in one day was a tall order, it was surprising that the figure had not been doubled, now that the number of machines in the sky nearly every day far exceeded anything that had happened in the last war.

Algy was inclined to think that a pilot would have to be more than lucky to break the record. One could not, he asserted, take on a formation of seven or eight Huns, and not only survive the combat, but bring every one of them down.

Lord Bertie Lissie raised another point — an important one. It would, he declared, be necessary to bring all the machines down on land, otherwise confirmation of the victories would not be possible. It was not necessary for him to qualify this statement by saying that many combats took place over the sea, particularly the Channel, as this was well known to them all. Even then, he continued, as machines usually flew in formation, it would be difficult for a pilot to prove that he, and not someone else, had fired the actual shots that had brought down any particular aircraft.

And so the discussion went on; and the upshot of it was (naturally, perhaps, in the circumstances) that before evening the affair had taken on a personal note, the pilots of each squadron asserting that if the record was to be broken, it would be by one of their fellows. Wilks, in particular, was convinced that a Hurricane would do the trick. Biggles'

s reply was to the effect that the Hurricane pilots flattered themselves ; if the record was broken it would be by a Spitfire.

This was, of course, only friendly rivalry, each pilot supporting his own squadron, as he was bound to, and the type of machine which he himself flew. There the matter ended when the party broke up, and no one expected that anything more would be heard of it.

But before the stars had completely faded from the sky the following morning Ginger made an unceremonious entry into his Commanding Officer's room and informed him in a voice hoarse with emotion that Squadron Leader Wilkinson had just shot down three machines in quick succession — two Messerschmitts and one Heinkel — and was even then in the air looking for more.

Biggles received this startling news with incredulity and chagrin.

'Holy mackerel!' he muttered as he tore off his pyjamas. 'We can't let Wilks get away with this. If he knocks down any more machines today his Hurricane-mongers will crow so loud that we shall all get the earache. What's Algy doing?'

'He's waiting for you.'

Five minutes later Biggles burst into the mess, where half a dozen pilots who were taking their time over bacon and eggs.

'Come on, get into the air!' he raved. 'Do you want that Hurricane crowd to get every Hun in the sky?'

Wilks has just got another!' It was Algy Lacey who spoke. Biggles started as if he had been stung. 'Another! Stiffen the crows! Who said so?'

'Toddy has just got it over the phone from Wing.'

'The dickens! This won't do. That's four he's got, and it's only eight o'clock. Ring up the sheds, Ginger, and tell them to get my machine ready — I'm on my way. See you later.'

He left the room abruptly.

His Spitfire was ticking over by the time he reached it. Without a word he tore into the air and headed straight for the coast, climbing at a steep angle for all the height he could get; but when he got there - to use the old tag - the cupboard was bare. To left and right the sky was empty except where, far to the south, a trail of 'flak' smoke marked the course of a British machine near the French coast. Circling, he pushed on to the Channel, searching for something on which to relieve his pent-up anxiety. But in vain. For an hour he flew up and down, but the only machines he saw were a Spitfire in the distance -

probably one of his own squadron - and a lonely Blenheim, spotting for the coast batteries. The wind freshened, bringing with it heavy masses of cloud. But it made no difference; not a German machine was to be seen; not a raider, not even a reconnaissance aircraft.

Another hour passed, and by the end of it he was fuming with impatience. Still he hung on, hoping, but eventually had to turn back to the aerodrome in order to refuel, for his tanks were getting low. A big cloud lay ahead, and disdaining to go round it, he plunged straight through. As he emerged on the far side he nearly collided with a big,

dark-painted machine, blotched all over with typical German camouflage. He recognized it instantly for one of the new Domiers.

The pilot of the German machine swerved as violently as did Biggles in order to avoid collision; pushing his nose down, he streaked for the cloud from which the Spitfire had appeared, and which promised a safe hiding-place.

In his anxiety that it should not escape Biggles threw caution to the winds, and without a glance round for possible danger he roared down behind the Dornier, raking it with long bursts of fire. On the very edge of the cloud the enemy machine jerked upwards spasmodically, which told him that the pilot had been hit. It fell over on to one wing, went into a

spin, and plunged earthward. Biggles watched it suspiciously, for he knew that it might be a trick to deceive him. But it was no trick. The wounded German pilot managed to get out of the spin near the ground and did his best to land; but he was out of luck, and the aircraft with the swastika insignia piled itself up, a splintered wreck, on the edge of a wood.

Only then did Biggles look up, to see, with a shock, that a second machine, a Hurricane, was flying beside him. The pilot was gesticulating wildly, but Biggles had no time to wonder what this was all about, for his fuel supply was now dangerously low; so he put his nose down and raced back to the aerodrome, which he reached just as the airscrew gave a final kick and stopped.

He was beckoning to Flight Sergeant Smyth when he saw to his surprise that the Hurricane had followed him and was now landing not far away. But he paid little attention to it. Climbing out of his Spitfire, he walked quickly towards the mess, intending to snatch a cup of coffee while his machine was being refuelled, and it was only as he passed close to the Hurricane that he recognized the pilot. It was Squadron Leader Wilkinson.

Wilks's first words made Biggles pull up in astonishment. 'What's the big idea?'

demanded the Hurricane pilot angrily. 'That was my Hun.'

'Your Hun? What are you talking about?' retorted Biggles. 'I'd been stalking him for twenty minutes, and had just got within range when you barged in.'

'What the deuce has that got to do with me?' inquired Biggles indignantly. 'I don't care two hoots if you'd been stalking him for twenty years. I got him, and I'm now going to get confirmation.'

'In another ten seconds I should have got that Hun,' protested Wilks furiously.

Then you were just ten seconds too late,' returned Biggles calmly. 'You shouldn't waste so much time.'

'You wouldn't have got him if it hadn't been for me. He was watching my machine and didn't even see you. You didn't give him a chance for a shot.'

'You're dead right,' agreed Biggles warmly; 'I took thundering good care not to. What do you take me for — a perishing target?'

'I reckon we ought to go fifty-fifty in the claim,' insisted Wilks.

Fifty-fifty my foot,' snorted Biggles. Since when did you get the idea that the Huns are sending up machines for your especial benefit? Birds wearing swastikas on their tails are as much my meat as yours. If you don't like it, find yourself another playground. Better still, go and drop a note on a Boche aerodrome and ask them to send some more machines over. I got that Domier and I'm not sharing it with anyone. If you choose to spend twenty minutes messing about trying to get close enough to a Hun to have a pot at him, that's your affair. Cheerio!' With a wave of his hand Biggles passed on towards the Squadron Office.

When he returned a few minutes later the Hurricane had gone, and he grinned at the Flight Sergeant, who had overheard the conversation.

I'm afraid that was a bit tough on Squadron Leader Wilkinson,' he remarked. 'But when this game gets so that you are expected to sit back and let someone else have the first pop I'm through with it. Are my tanks filled?'

Yes, sir.'

'Do you happen to know if there is an alert on in London?' 'I don't think so, sir. Jerry seems to be taking a day off to get his breath.'

As he flew once more in the direction of the Channel Biggles derived some comfort from the fact that Wilks had added nothing to his score.

It was disappointing, though, that none of his own Spitfires — some of them had been back for petrol — had managed to score a victory.

Reaching the coast he began a repetition of his earlier patrol, seeking a machine of any sort that wore the black cross. But not one could he find. He even went as far as the French coast, receiving a good plastering from enemy antiaircraft gunners for his pains; then, realizing that even if he did shoot down an enemy machine it would be out of sight of watchers along the cliffs of Dover, he turned his nose towards home. The ceaseless watching was beginning to tire him; not for a moment can a fighting pilot allow his eyes to rest. A moment's lack of vigilance is often paid for dearly.

Another two hours passed slowly, and Biggles began to edge towards the aerodrome, for again his tanks were running low. He made a last survey of the Channel, and was about to glide away when a fleeting shadow fell across his machine. The swift jerk of his head, and the spasmodic movements of hand and foot on joystick and rudder-bar were practically simultaneous with the roar of his guns. A Heinkel, fifty feet above and in front of him, burst into flames and dropped like a stone.

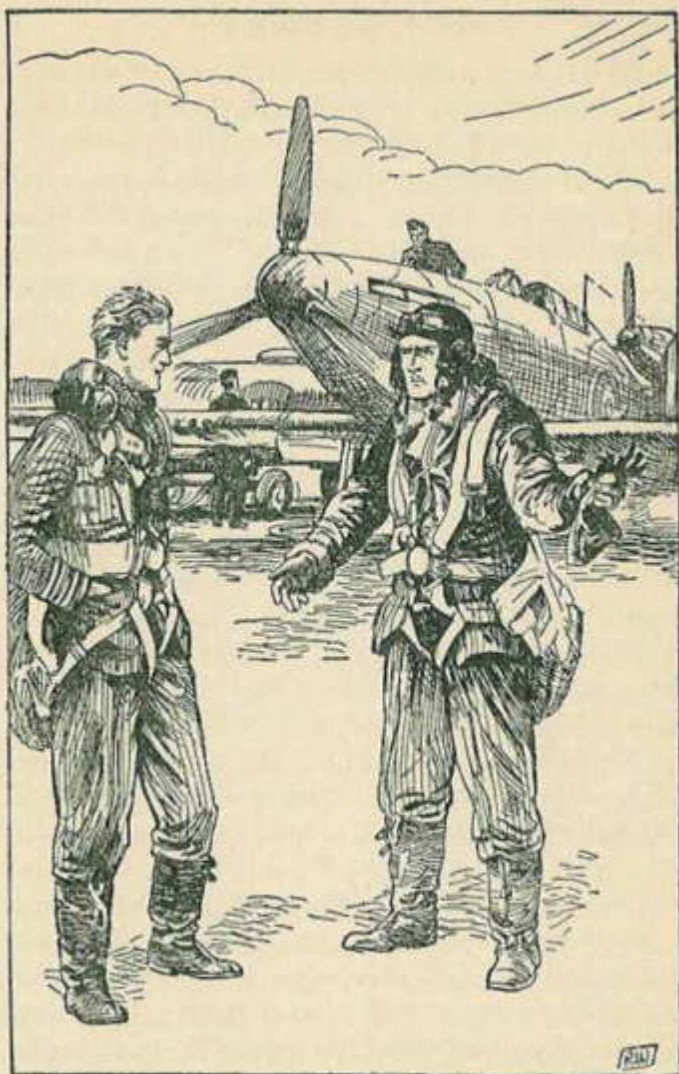
The whole thing had happened in a split second, and was a good example of the amazing co-ordination of brain and muscle that can be developed by the expert air fighter. There was no time for actual thought. From the moment the shadow had fallen across the Spitfire, Biggles's movements, separate in themselves, had followed each other in such quick succession that they appeared to be only one. First he had looked to see what had thrown the shadow; observing the Heinkel, his hands and feet had aligned his machine, and he had fired. He had hit his target at the first burst, and knew he would never make a better shot in his life.

He did not actually see the burning machine crash, for the instant he knew that his shots had taken effect he looked round to see if the machine was alone or one of a formation.

To his utter astonishment he saw a Hurricane tear down towards him, pull up in a steep climbing turn, and then come roaring back. As it passed him the pilot shook a clenched fist, and Biggles recognized Wilks's machine.

Jehoshaphat! I believe I've done it again,' he muttered with a worried frown, and then burst out laughing as the funny side struck him.

As he cruised back to the aerodrome he tried to work out what must have happened. The Heinkel, he reasoned, must have been diving for home with Wilks in pursuit, in which case it was unlikely that the German pilot had even seen him. He would probably be looking back over his shoulder at the pursuing machine. By a bit of bad luck for himself the German had chosen a course that took him between Biggles and the sun, with the result that his machine had thrown a shadow across the Spitfire.



'All right,' he grated, 'but you keep out of my way'

As he landed Biggles was not surprised to see the Hurricane come in behind him and taxi to within a few yards of where he had stopped. Wilks, pale with anger, leapt down.

'All right - all right keep calm,' Biggles cried as he approached. 'You don't suppose I pinched your Hun on purpose?'

'On purpose! Why, it was an absolute fluke,' rasped Wilks. 'You never even saw him, and he was coming down after you like a ton of bricks.'

'Coming down on me?' queried Biggles.

'He certainly was. He was after you, and he'd got you stone cold. He was sitting up in the sun and you never even saw him. I spotted him, though, and roared down to save your skin. But he was an old hand, and took a look back over his shoulder; he spotted me on his tail and it put him off his stroke. If I hadn't been there he would have got you - you wouldn't have known what had hit you.'

‘If that's the case then I can only say that I'm very much obliged to you,' returned Biggles calmly.

'Is that all you have to say?'

'What do you want me to do - burst into tears?'

‘No, but as we were both in at the death I don't think you can rightly claim that Hun.'

Can't I!' exploded Biggles. You'll see whether I can or not. The combat happened in full view of the coast observers - there must be a thousand people ready to swear that a Spitfire did the trick. Of course, if you're going to hang about to watch me do my stuff, that's no business of mine. No, Wilks, if you don't like it you can run away and play by yourself. By the way, have you got any more Huns?'

‘No, but I'd have had two more if you hadn't butted in.'

For the love of Mike don't let's go over all that Again,' protested Biggles, looking pained.

Wilks glared. 'All right,' he grated, 'but you keep out of my way.' With that parting shot he strode back to his machine.

Biggles watched him go with a sympathetic smile on his face. Leaving his Spitfire to be refuelled, he hurried down to the mess for an early

lunch.

His third victory that day was a straightforward duel which was won fairly and squarely by superb flying and accurate shooting, and only then after one of the longest and most difficult combats in all his experience. The victim was a Messerschmitt 109; the pilot was cruising about, apparently looking for trouble in much the same manner as Biggles.

They spotted each other at the same moment, and turned towards one another, so there was no question of pursuit. The

German seemed to be as anxious for the conflict as Biggles, and the opening moves were sufficient to warn Biggles that he had caught a tartar. Not that he minded. If the Hun were a better man than he — well, it would be just too bad. The possibility was always on the boards.

To describe the combat in detail, move and counter-move, would be like cataloguing the moves in a game of chess, and as intricate; but by the end of a quarter of an hour neither had gained an advantage or given the other a reasonable opportunity for a coup de grace, although a lot of ammunition had been expended.

Biggles's early impetuosity received a check when a burst of fire from his opponent went through the fuselage just behind his head, one shot actually grazing his helmet. After that he settled down to cold, calculated fighting. The opening stages took place well inside the British coast-line, but as it progressed the two machines drifted with the prevailing wind first to the Channel and then nearer to enemy territory — much to Biggles's concern. However, he could do nothing about it. Banking, diving, and zooming, the two machines fought on, the rest of the world forgotten. Both pilots had opportunities to break away, but both refused to take them, preferring to see the thing through to the bitter end. More than once the machines passed so close that the pilots could see each other's faces. The German, Biggles saw, was a clean-shaven fellow of about his own age, with long flaxen hair. He wore no helmet.

Biggles's ammunition was running low, and he knew that at any moment it might give out, when suddenly came the end. The pilots found themselves facing each other at a distance of not more than a hundred yards. Both started shooting, the tracer bullets making a glittering streak between them. Biggles knew that collision was inevitable unless the

German turned, for he himself had no intention of turning; not only would this be a sign of weakness, but it would be breaking one of the first rules of air combat. For this reason he did not expect the other to give way, either. He had actually braced himself for the crash when, at the last moment, the German lost his nerve and dived, passing underneath the Spitfire.

Biggles was round in a flash, expecting the Messerschmitt to come up behind him. But it did not. It was going down in an erratic glide towards the sea with stationary airscrew.

That the pilot was in difficulties was clear, and as Biggles tore down behind him he saw the reason. One of the German's elevators had been shot away; the whole tail unit looked as though it might collapse at any moment.

Biggles did not use his guns again, although a finishing shot now would have been a simple matter. Instead, he watched the pilot pancake on the water. After that he waited only long enough to make sure that boats were going out to pick him up, and then headed for home to report the affair and put in a claim for the victory. He also wanted a fresh supply of ammunition.

He was greeted on the aerodrome by Algy, who informed him that Wilks had not improved his score.

'Then he's still one ahead of me,' remarked Biggles. 'I've still got time to even things up.'

'If you can get another you'll be quits,' Algy told him. 'Wilks won't get any more today.'

'Why not?'

'He took on a Hun near Folkestone and the gunner nearly got him first burst. A bullet grazed his arm and the doctor has forbidden him to fly again today. His arm is in a sling, and he's as sore as a bear.'

'That's tough luck,' replied Biggles with genuine sympathy..

He turned to the Flight Sergeant who had come up. 'Get some patches put over these holes.' He pointed to the bullet holes in the fuselage. 'Have her ready as soon as you can.'

Ring up the mess and let me know when she's finished.'

'Very good, sir.'

The work of repairing the damaged machine took longer than Biggles expected. Thirty bullets had gone through it; one had nicked a cable, necessitating a replacement. So it was late in the afternoon before he was in the air again in a final attempt to level with Wilks and, if possible, beat him. He had already put in six hours' flying that day, which was enough for any pilot. He was desperately tired, but his anxiety to even up the score urged him on.

But it seemed as if he was to be out of luck, for although he scoured the sky in all directions for more than two hours not a single hostile aircraft could he find. For some reason or other the sky was completely deserted. Bored and fed up, he hung on until it was nearly dark, and in the end had to turn towards home without having fired a shot. As a matter of fact, he did not reach home. He finished his patrol some way from the aerodrome, and rather than risk a forced landing by running out of petrol, he dropped in at the first aerodrome he reached in order to pick some up. It turned out to be a night -

fighter squadron, and such was the hospitality of the pilots amongst whom he found himself that he stayed on, and finally allowed himself to be persuaded to stay to dinner.

Having made this decision, he went, as a matter of duty, to the telephone, and rang up his own squadron to let them know that he was safe.

You'd better stay where you are for the night, sir,' Toddy told him from the other end. It's getting pretty thick here, and it would be dangerous to try to get back in the dark. I'll send transport for you. By the way, did you get another Hun?

Biggles admitted reluctantly that he had drawn blank. 'That's a pity,' commiserated Toddy.

'Why — any particular reason?'

'Yes. Wilks has just rung up. The whole crowd of them are coming over tonight —

presumably to crow about their score.'

'Is that so?' replied Biggles slowly. 'Oh, well, it can't be helped. Send a car for me about ten o'clock.'

'O.K., sir.'

As a matter of fact, it was nearly half past ten when Biggles got back to the aerodrome.

He was still in full flying kit. He found the mess chock-a-block with officers, for Wilks and his Hurricane pilots, knowing that he was coming back, had deliberately delayed their departure until he returned. His entry was heralded by a derisive yell from the Hurricane pilots, and a chorus of protest from the Spitfire pilots.

What's all the noise about?' inquired Biggles evenly, as he dropped into a chair. Why all the excitement, Wilks ?'

'We're feeling a bit on our toes — and don't pretend you don't know why. Tough luck, you old son of a gun.'

What are you tough-lucking me for?' demanded Biggles with simulated astonishment. '

You, with your arm in a sling.'

'Because you've now got to admit that Hurricanes are the real Hun-getters,' declared Wilks.

Biggles frowned. Whatever gave you that idea?'

'I reckon we've proved it by getting four Huns to your three, in a straight contest.'

Biggles pretended to look enlightened. Oh, so that's what you're all crowing about?'

'It's something to crow about, isn't it? Come on, Biggles, you're whacked, and you know it. Stop bluffing.'

'Bluff? Me bluff?' Biggles looked pained. 'My dear chap, we don't do that sort of thing —

not in this squadron. But who told you that I'd only got three Huns?'

The first suspicion that Biggles was holding something up his sleeve was reflected in Wilks's face. His smile faded.

'Toddy told us. It was after daylight when he told us, too.'

What's daylight got to do with it?' inquired Biggles blandly. 'That was

hours ago. What do you think I've been doing since – lounging about in the mess, like you?'

Silence fell. All eyes were on Biggles's face, for by this time everyone knew that something had happened. The atmosphere was tense.

'What have you been doing?' demanded Wilks.

Biggles deliberately lit a cigarette to keep the party on tenterhooks.

Well, if you really want to know,' he murmured, gazing at the ceiling, 'I happened to drop in at a night fighter squadron. After dinner there was a raid. The lads went off to do their stuff– and – well, I couldn't just sit there alone, could I? So I went with them. Struck lucky, too. Found a couple of bombers near Redhill – all by myself. There we were —'

'Cut out the blah-blah,' snapped Wilks. 'How many did you get?'

Biggles sent a smoke ring curling towards the ceiling before he answered. 'Only two,' he said carelessly. 'And to settle any doubts which you may justifiably have, they've both been confirmed --'

The rest was drowned in the yell that went up from the Spitfire pilots, a yell that brought the mess waiter to see what was the matter.

Bertie Lissie was doing a fox-trot with Algy, while the rest beat time.

'Balmy,' murmured the waiter sadly, as he closed the door.

CHAPTER 12

THE FORTUNE OF WAR

'LUCK,' remarked Squadron Leader Wilkinson, with unusual solemnity, is a frivolous lady, and about as reliable as a meteorological report. One day, when things look grim, she'll blow you a kiss; the next, just when you think you're on top of the world, she'll slap your face. The trouble is, you don't know which it's going to be. And when it comes to flying, she's never far away. No one taking off in an aircraft can say – no, not for five minutes ahead – what he's going to run into.'

'Which,' put in Biggles quietly, 'is probably a very good thing.'

'Take the case of one of my lads, young Tony Luke,' resumed Wilks. 'I would have bet any money that he would have gone a long way. When I first knew him, in France, at the beginning of the war, there

wasn't a finer pilot in the service. Lady Luck seemed to ride with him, and he couldn't do anything wrong. Then, suddenly, for no reason that I could ever discover, she let him down, and he hit the floor with a bump that knocked a screw loose in his mental equipment – at least, that's the way it looked to me. I never saw a fellow change so quickly. From being a steady pilot he just went – well, gaga.'

Biggles nodded moodily. 'Quite true, but there was a reason for that,' he murmured.

There were about a dozen officers gathered round the fire in the ante-room of 666

Squadron. Occasionally one of them would pull his chair a little nearer to the fire, which was nearly out; for the hour was late and the night was cold. Outside the wind fretted and fumed across the bleak expanse of treeless land that was the aerodrome. It is likely that the officers would have been in bed had not Willa, looking strangely tired and depressed, dropped in about dusk, and having stayed to dinner, discovered that he was weatherbound. So they had sat up, yarning, as airmen will. And when airmen yarn it is always about the same thing, the thing that matters most - flying.

Wilks sipped his drink and turned to Biggles. 'You were saying,' he prompted, 'that there was a reason for Tony cracking up the way he did. How did you learn about it? He was never in your squadron, was he?'

'No. I got the details from Joe Fairwell - he commanded the squadron Tony was in before he was posted to you. He came to you from hospital, didn't he?'

'That's right. What happened? I suspected there was something. As a matter of fact, I heard odd rumours, but nothing definite. The thing happened in France, I understand?'

'Yes - it happened in France, quite early in the war, before the Germans broke through.'

Biggles lit a cigarette and flicked the dead match into the dying fire.

'Go ahead, I'm listening,' invited Wilks.

'It's a longish story.'

'No matter, the night's our own.'

Biggles settled down more comfortably in his chair. His eyes took on a far-away look as he drew at his cigarette and sent a wisp of grey smoke coiling ghost-like to the ceiling.

'The thing started,' he began, 'as these things so often do - with a crash. It seems that Tony was doing a late patrol over the Maginot Line, when, inside French territory, he ran a Junkers 88. He gave chase and caught it. There was a scrap, and the Junkers went down

- a flamer. It crashed behind the French lines, not far from Sedan. And that, it seems, was

- although he didn't know it - the turning-point in Tony's life. Luck, as you say, had been his partner, but even as the Junkers was going down she turned her back on him - or so we must conclude. Don't ask me why. I don't know. Luck doesn't give reasons. Anyway, at that precise moment some fool archie gunners, French gunners, decided to take a hand.

Maybe they thought the Junkers had won the fight and it was our own machine going down. Nobody knows. Nobody ever will know. All I know is that a lump of shrapnel hit Tony's engine and brought him down.

'As he went into a glide he wasn't particularly worried - there was no reason why he should be. He didn't even consider it necessary to bale out. Naturally he'd try to save his machine, and with that object looked about for a place to land. He was out of luck. There wasn't any place to land, but he didn't realize it until it was too late to jump. He tried to get into a pasture, but his wing-tip hit a poplar, and that was that. When he woke up he was in bed with a broken back - or so he thought.

'Apparently, what had happened was this. The poplar stood in the grounds of a château.

Two ladies, mother and daughter, were walking in the grounds, and seeing the crash, ran up just in time to drag Tony clear of the wreck before it went up in flames. They fetched help, and with some servants got him into the house and put him on a bed. Then, quite properly, they telephoned to the nearest R.A.F. unit. The M.O. came straight over, and arrived just as Tony was recovering consciousness. He was in terrible pain. The M.O.

examined him, and reckoned he was in a bad way. His back was injured, and it would have been dangerous to move him. He sent for

the lady who owned the château and told her so; he asked if he might leave the patient where he was for a few days until he could get a better idea of the damage. This was agreed, and so Tony stayed in the chateau — in bed, of course.

'Now it is not for me to criticize anybody; it's always easy to foresee things afterwards —

so to speak. But I sometimes wonder if the lady, who happened to be a Countess — I won't mention names — was wise in detailing her daughter, Marie, to take charge of the sick-room. She acted for the best, no doubt. But Marie was a pretty girl, and Tony was a good-looking lad. The result was inevitable. They fell in love with each other. This, for Tony, was a tragedy because, apart from his injuries, he was hardly in a financial position to ask the hand in marriage of the daughter of one of the oldest and richest families in France. He was too young, anyway, to think seriously of marriage. Besides, he knew that he might be killed any day. Still, that's how it was.

By the end of a fortnight Tony was better — much better; that is, as far as the injuries sustained in the crash were concerned. But his heart was sick, for he knew that he had absolutely no right to make love to his nurse, and the knowledge that when he left the château he would have to say goodbye to her for ever got on his mind. He was, of course, still in a pretty low state. He afterwards told Joe that he used to lie there wondering how he could pretend to the M.O. that he was worse than he really was, so that he could stay on. In fact, he lied to the M.O. to maintain the deception.

'But it seems that Marie was feeling much the same way, and Tony suspected it. Don't ask me why he acted as he did because I don't know — unless it was that he had correct ideas of honour. Maybe he was wise. Maybe he acted like a fool. As I say, it's hard to judge people's actions when they're not normal. What he did was this. One night he was overcome by remorse at the trick he was playing on the M.O. and the Countess, by pretending to be worse than he was. He realized apparently that he had no right to trespass further on the hospitality of his hostess. He debated in his mind whether he should tell the truth or just go. In the end, unable to make up his mind, he took a coin from his pocket and tossed for it. He wasn't to know that Lady Luck had deserted him.

The coin came down heads, which meant go. What would have happened if it had come down tails must always remain for conjecture.

'Well, feeling that he couldn't face saying goodbye to Marie, he dressed right then, in the middle of the night, and, getting through the window, departed. He left a note for the Countess, thanking her for what she had done for him and telling her why he was leaving. About dawn some French troops found him staggering along the Sedan road and took him to hospital.

'But Lady Luck had not yet finished. Tragedy was close behind. In the morning Marie of course discovered that he had gone, and guessed the reason. She discovered where he had been taken, and set off in her car to visit him. She had nearly reached the hospital when a Hun came over and dropped a bomb — not aiming at anything in particular; you know the sort of thing. It burst near the car and blew it to pieces. Marie wasn't killed outright. They carried her into the hospital, and before she died she sent a message to Tony by the M.O. "Tell him," she said, looking at the sky, "that I shall be waiting for him, up there." That was all.

'The M.O. kept the news from Tony until he was discharged from hospital fit for duty.

Then he told him, and gave him the message. Tony said not a word, but there's no doubt that something in him died at that moment. One can imagine how he felt — the pain, and all the useless regret. He must have felt responsible for her death, for if he hadn't run away as he did she wouldn't have been near the hospital. But that's how it was. In his room, that night, he told his C.O. all about it, and shortly afterwards Joe told me. He was worried about the way Tony was behaving, particularly in the air. He flew like a madman, as if he didn't care whether he lived or died — which was probably the case. He shot down seven Huns in a week and, the last I heard, he'd piled up a score of twenty-eight inside two months — all confirmed. How many he really got heaven only knows, for he wouldn't bother to confirm his victories. Joe told me that he had the greatest difficulty in getting him to fill in his combat reports. He used to come back with his machine shot to rags. The truth of the matter was, I have no doubt, he was looking for Old Man Death, and he didn't care who knew it. He was wounded, and went to hospital, but even then he couldn't die. When he came out he was posted to you, Wilks. From what I hear, he's still crazy, roaring about in the blue — looking for her. He's been looking for her for six months —'

'Yes,' put in Wilks, 'he has. And now, at last, he's found her.'

Biggles started. 'What do you mean ? ' he cried sharply.

Wilks stared into the fire. He and I ran into a bunch of Messerschmitts this afternoon.

We got three of them. Then they got him – in flames. He jumped clear, from twenty thousand – without a parachute.'

There was silence for a little while. Then Biggles looked at the clock. 'Well, we're on early in the morning, so I think it's time we were getting to bed,' he suggested.

CHAPTER 13

BERTIE PICKS THE LOCK

BIGGLES was in conference with his three Flight Commanders when the sound of an approaching aero-engine lined his forehead with a puzzled frown. Had it been the deep-throated roar of a Spitfire engine it would have occasioned no surprise; but in comparison it was a gentle purr, little more than the hum of a two-stroke motor-cycle engine.

Biggles broke off in what he was saying and turned to the window. 'What the dickens is this coming?' he muttered.

'Tiger-Moth,' murmured Algy, as the aircraft skimmed over the aerodrome boundary with the obvious intention of landing.

The wrinkle in Biggles's brow deepened. 'What on earth's it doing here?'

Chappie from a training school, doing a cross-country, lost his way,' opined Bertie Lissie. When I was instructing I once had a pupil land at Aberdeen thinking he was at Bristol. By Jove, you should have seen his face!'

The Moth taxied up to the building and two officers alighted. One, evidently the pilot, remained near the machine; the other made off towards the Squadron Office.

Biggles groaned. 'It's Raymond,' he observed. That means trouble. What does he want now, I wonder?' He saluted, and the others stood to attention as the air officer entered.

Air Commodore Raymond shook hands with the assembled officers, a ghost of a smile playing about the corners of his mouth at the expression on Biggles's face.

'You *don't seem particularly pleased to see me,' he remarked, a hint of banter in his voice.

'You wouldn't expect me to be shrieking with joy, sir, would you?' returned Biggles evenly. 'I'm no thought-reader, but I've come to know that when you turn up, something, somebody, somewhere —'

'Yes – yes. I know all about it,' interrupted the Air Commodore blandly. 'That's the penalty for being so efficient, Bigglesworth. But this is a comparatively easy matter –

quite a simple little job.'

Biggles passed his cigarette case. 'It will be interesting, sir, to hear your idea of a simple job. How about these officers? Can they stay or shall I ask them to leave us?'

The Air Commodore lit a cigarette and sat in a chair Biggles had pulled out for him.

They can stay. There's no need to adjourn the conference. It won't take me long to say what I have to say.'

Go ahead, sir.'

The air officer thought for a moment or two, as if weighing his words. 'Well, I may as well be frank,' he said bluntly. 'I want somebody to go to France.'

'What, again!' cried Biggles.

'Oh, it isn't as bad as all that,' went on the Air Commodore quickly. 'It's merely a matter of taking a man over and bringing him back.'

Biggles eyed the Air Commodore suspiciously. 'Just as simple as all that,' he murmured, with a trace of sarcasm.

'Well – er – not exactly, admitted Raymond. 'Here are the details. You know the canal that runs from Arras to Abbeville? It's a real canal – that is to say, there are locks at intervals.' 'Yes, sir, I know it perfectly well.'

Good. We've just received information that at this moment a convoy of no fewer than twenty barges is proceeding along it. They're loaded with bombs, which are on their way to the aerodrome at Abbeville for the bombing of London. I sent a machine over this morning to take a

photograph, and the print shows the convoy eighteen miles north of the village of Bonner. We know what time they left Arras, so provided they maintain the same rate of progress – and there's no reason to suppose otherwise – a simple calculation tells us that they should reach the lock near the village of Bonner at nine o'clock tonight.'

'And you want somebody to lay an egg on them?' put in Biggles – prematurely as it happened.

The Air Commodore shook his head. 'No,' he said. 'Bombing is not always accurate. The ideal thing would be to blow up the lock with a charge of explosive just as the barges are passing through it; that would not only destroy the barges, the bombs, and the lock, but the resultant flood would inundate enemy aerodrome Number 14. Further, it would generally upset the Boche lines of communication. It's an opportunity that might not occur again for a long while, so we must make absolutely sure of our mark, and to that end we are going to some pains to ensure success. We've decided to blow up the lock.

The work will be done by one of our agents, who has recently volunteered for espionage work.'

'What nationality is he?' asked Biggles suspiciously.

'That's something we needn't discuss. What does it matter? Of course, he isn't British.

All we need is a pilot to take him over – he'll do the rest.'

'But that means using a two-seater machine,' remarked Biggles. 'Why come to me? I know some two-seater pilots —'

'Not so fast,' protested the Air Commodore. 'We need a man who has done this sort of thing before, and one who knows every inch of the ground. Naturally I came to you first. You can refuse if you like. I wouldn't order a man to do a show like this; it's essentially a mission for a volunteer.'

Biggles smiled wanly. 'All right, sir. I don't think we need dwell on that. If you think I'm the man for the job I'll have a shot at it. What about a machine, though?'

'There's one outside. I flew down in it in order to leave it here.'

Biggles surveyed the Moth through the window without enthusiasm.

'There are several possible landing-grounds on both sides of the canal near Bonner,' went on the Air Commodore. 'All you have to do is take our man over, land, wait for him to do the job, and then bring him back.'

'I'd rather take one of my own fellows, if you don't mind; somebody I can trust —'

'No, this man of ours is all right. He needs experience. As a matter of fact, he lived near the place for years, so it's hard to see how he can go wrong. He'll be here at eight-fifteen sharp. Make a good job of this and I won't worry you again for a bit. I may not be able to get along this evening so I'll wish you luck now. Can you find me transport to take me and my pilot to the station?'

Biggles made the necessary arrangements by phone, saw the Air Commodore on his way, and returned to the others.

After he had gone Biggles regarded his Flight Commanders whimsically. 'Take my tip and never volunteer for anything,' he said sadly. 'I did once, in a rash moment, and I've been doing it ever since.' He glanced at the clock. We may as well wash out until after lunch.'

Bertie opened the door. His dog, Towser, which had evidently been waiting outside, shot into the room exhibiting those extravagant manifestations of joy in which a dog indulges after it has been separated from its master. Biggles, who was on his way to the door, side-stepped to avoid the animal, and stumbled; he made a grab at the desk to save himself, missed it, and fell heavily, but broke his fall to some extent with his right hand.

It was one of those accidents that happen in a flash. He got up immediately, a spasm of pain twisting his lips. Holding his wrist he turned to Bertie.

'How many times have I got to tell you to keep that dog of yours under control?' he said curtly. 'I know he didn't mean any harm, but —' He broke off, examining his wrist.

'By Jove! I say, you know, I'm most frightfully sorry, sir,' stammered Bertie, dropping his monocle in his agitation. 'That was a bit thick. I've told the little rascal not to do that sort of thing.'

'He pays about as much attention to you as you do to me,' snapped Biggles.

Bertie looked pained.

Biggles regarded him reflectively. 'You know, Bertie, there are times when I find myself wondering if you're a bigger fool than you look, or look a bigger fool than you are.'

'I say, sir, that's a bit steep – absolutely vertical in fact. After all, Towser's only a pup.

When I was in India there was a chappie who kept a tiger —'

'I hope it bit him,' cut in Biggles coldly.

Matter of fact, it did.'

'Fine. The animal evidently had some sense.'

Bertie subsided.

Algy was the first to realize the significance of the accident, probably because he was looking at Biggles's wrist, which was already beginning to swell.

'That settles any question of your going to France tonight,' he observed quietly.

There was dead silence for several seconds while Biggles examined his wrist, feeling it gingerly.

'Ye've sprained it,' put in Angus Mackail.

'Do you think so?'

Isla doot of it.'

'You'd better see the M.O.,' suggested Algy seriously.

Biggles bit his lip as he tried to close his fingers. 'This is a nice business,' he muttered. '

What am I going to tell Raymond?'

Bertie's face lighted up. 'I shall have to take the chappie over,' he declared.

'I'll go and see what the M.O. has to say about it,' decided Biggles. It may not be as bad as we think.'

But the M.O. soon settled any doubts on that score. He bound up the wrist and put Biggles's arm in a sling.

'There you are, my boy,' he said cheerfully; 'you can put any idea of flying out of your head for a fortnight - at least. Those are my orders.'

Biggles did not argue, knowing that the doctor was right. 'I'll do the job tonight,' offered Algy as they all walked on to the mess.

'I'll go myself,' declared Angus.

'No fear. Absolutely no,' protested Bertie. 'I mean to say, after all, Towser's my dog, and all that sort of thing, if you get my meaning.'

'Do you know the country?' inquired Biggles.

'Not half! Why, dash it all, I did three months on the aerodrome at Abbeville before the Frenchies went wallop. I know the place better than the local rabbits.'

'Let's toss for it,' suggested Algy.

'No, I think Bertie's right,' concluded Biggles. 'The only alternative to ringing up Raymond and telling him that I can't do the job is for somebody else to go, and I think it's Bertie's pigeon. It was his dog that did the damage, and what is more important, he knows the country - or he should.'

'Every jolly old tree,' confirmed Bertie. 'We'll be back in a couple of jiffies.'

'I hope you're right,' murmured Biggles. 'Very well, let's leave it at that.'

At a quarter past eight he was on the tarmac with Bertie, waiting for the agent who was to do the actual work of blowing up the lock. He had decided that if Air Commodore Raymond had turned up he would have to confess the truth, otherwise he would say nothing. He carried a short leather coat over his arm for the sake of appearance. The sun had already set, and it was an ideal night for the work: moonlight, but with sufficient cloud to provide cover should it be needed.

'You've got a gun, I suppose?' he inquired.

Bertie tapped his pocket. 'You bet I have.'

A moment later a car drew up and two men got out. One was an

officer whom Biggles did not know - evidently a member of the Intelligence Staff; the other was a small, middle-aged, nervous-looking man dressed in the blue dungarees of a French peasant.

The officer came over to Biggles. 'Here we are,' he announced. 'This is your man. Are you ready?'

'Waiting,' replied Biggles laconically, looking at the agent, who was carrying a small, square, but obviously heavy parcel.

'In that case there's no need for me to hang about. I'll get along. You might give Raymond a ring when you get back to let him know how things went off. We'll send a pilot down to collect the machine and our man later on.'

Good enough.'

The officer got back in his car and drove away.

The agent spoke. 'We go, eh?' he said in English; but with a strong foreign accent.

Biggles frowned, for he had caught the reek of brandy. He said nothing, but he suspected that the agent had been fortifying himself for his ordeal. It was a bad sign.

Bertie addressed the man. I say, old chap, how long are you likely to be away from the machine?'

The agent shrugged his shoulders with a fatalistic gesture. 'Who knows?'

'I don't — that's why I asked you,' murmured Bertie.

'One hour — two hours — maybe three,' was the vague reply.

Really! By Jove! Well, don't be too long. And I say, be careful with that box of fireworks up topsides, won't you?'

She is safe,' declared the man. The fuse she is fixed for fifteen minutes. That give me time to get clear.'

'I wasn't thinking about you, old top,' continued Bertie cheerfully, as he helped his accomplice into his seat and then climbed into his own cockpit.

Two minutes later he was in the air, climbing steeply, and after an uneventful flight over the Channel began a long furtive glide through the wavering searchlight beams that lined the French coast. These were only to be expected and he was not perturbed; which clearly was more than could be said for the passenger, for every time a fresh beam stabbed the sky he struck Bertie on the shoulder and pointed to it.

'I say, old chap, you really must sit still,' shouted Bertie at last. 'They won't hurt you.' He had an uncomfortable feeling that the man was nervous.

This was confirmed a few minutes later when, in spite of his efforts to slip across the coast unobserved, some 'flak' came up, although it burst at a safe distance. The agent sprang up in his seat.

'Go back!' he shouted.

'Why?' asked Bertie amazed.

'We are seen. We are shot at.'

'Look here, my lad, if you don't sit down I'll konk you on the bean with my gun,' roared Bertie, beginning to get angry.

The man continued to protest, whereupon Bertie threw a loop. After that there was silence, and he glided on through the beams towards his objective. He was satisfied that the searchlights had not picked him up. Gliding at little more than staffing speed the machine made no noise, and he watched the lights drowse one by one behind him.

The actual landing was the most trying part of the operation, for there was always a risk of the field being trapped' — that is, prepared by the enemy for the reception of machines engaged in special missions, the trap taking the form of obstacles calculated to crash a machine as it glided in. For a moment or two as the Moth swept low across the marsh which he had selected for his landing-ground, Bertie held his breath. Then the wheels touched lightly and the aircraft ran on to a smooth landing. He climbed down.

'Here we are,' he said cheerfully. I suppose you saw the jolly old canal as we came down? It's only about a quarter of a mile away — over there.' He pointed to the north, and then leaned forward in order to see his companion's face, for he had heard a slight sound that puzzled him. It was as if the man's teeth were chattering.

'I say, old fellow, what's the matter? Are you cold?' he asked

anxiously.

The man did not answer. He passed down his parcel and then got down himself, peering into the darkness.

Bertie saw that he had not been mistaken. The man was trembling violently.

'It is dangerous, zis place,' he breathed.

Fiddlesticks!' answered Bertie. 'What did you think you were coming on — a picnic?

Off you go.'

The man hung back.

Bertie mustered all the tolerance in his nature. 'Now look here, my lad,' he said seriously, just you trot along and do your stuff. The sooner the job's done the sooner we go home.

My coffee will be getting cold.'

Still the man hesitated, and Bertie knew that he was in for trouble. Consequently, he was relieved when, in a moment or two, the man picked up his parcel and disappeared into the night. But the relief was shortlived. Inside a minute he was back.

'Here, I say, what's the matter?' asked Bertie quickly. 'You really can't go on like this.

Hop along, there's a good chap. I'm getting chilly.'

'You will be here — yes?' inquired the man anxiously.

Bertie kept his temper. 'Of course I'll be here. Get a move on. We don't want to stick around here all night. I'm getting my feet wet.'

The agent made an inaudible remark and set off again, while Bertie made preparations for a quick take-off when he returned. So engrossed was he in his task that he started violently when, a few seconds later, a voice spoke from the other side of the machine.

But it was only the agent again.

Bertie ducked under the fuselage and joined him. 'Now look here, you

really can't go on like this,' he protested.

'It ees impossible!' cried the other excitedly.

Bertie stared. What's that?'

Zere are soldiers.'

What have they got to do with it?'

'But soldiers!'

'You've just said that,' Bertie pointed out. What did you expect to find — a jolly old mothers' meeting? Come on now, be a good boy; toddle along and let off your fireworks or I shall start to get angry with you — yes, by jingo!'

'But zee soldiers will see me.'

'Not they. I'll bet they're playing pontoon or something. I know! If they come towards you make a noise like a horse.'

The man shook his head. 'No, I am not so brave,' he said huskily.

Of course you are,' persisted Bertie. 'You're as brave as a lion — anyone can see that.'

'No. Tonight it ees impossible. We come back another time — perhaps tomorrow.'

Bertie took a pace nearer. His voice was ominously calm. 'Tomorrow won't do, my white-livered little rabbit.'

He was wondering what he ought to do, for there was no time to return to the aerodrome and report what had happened. Already the barges would be approaching the lock. There seemed to be only one answer. He tapped his useless confederate on the chest with a calculating forefinger.

'Now you listen to me, my noble gladiator. You stay here and look after the machine.

Can you manage that?'

The agent looked horrified. It was obvious that his one idea was to get back across the Channel as quickly as possible.

Bertie perceived this. When he spoke again his voice was gentle, but behind it lay a crisp, vibrant ring that had not previously been there.

'If you're not here with this aircraft when I come back, the next time I see you I'll cut off your legs, sharpen the stumps, and drive you into the ground with a mallet— by Jove, I will! — you mark my words.' With this parting admonition he picked up the parcel and made off in the direction of the lock.

A walk of a few minutes was sufficient to convince him that the man was at least right in one respect. Seven or eight

soldiers were standing on or about the lock and, judging by a faint glow of light that issued from the guard-house window, it seemed likely that there were more inside. Unfortunately, in every direction the country was open, bare, and desolate; a mouse could hardly have approached the lock without being observed.

This is awkward — deuced awkward,' he mused, as he put down his load and stopped to consider the problem.

A minute's reflection was sufficient for him to realize that conditions were unlikely to be changed and that any attempt to get near the lock was doomed to failure from the start.

Still, the idea of returning to the aerodrome with the mission incomplete was unthinkable, and he refused to consider it.

With no fixed plan in his mind he struck off at a tangent towards the canal, reaching it some distance above the lock. It was, he found, a turgid-looking stream, supported on either side by raised banks. Where were the barges? He looked up and down the shining ribbon of water, and although in the moonlight he could see for a considerable distance, there was no sign of them. He glanced at his luminous wrist-watch. It was three minutes to nine.

'These Intelligence chappies don't live up to their name,' he ruminated. It looks as if they'

ve made a mistake in their beastly calculations, and the boats have either passed hours ago or are still ambling along near Arras. I'd better see if I can find them.' With his dangerous parcel under his arm he set off along the towing-path.

After covering about two hundred yards he came to a bend, and as he

rounded it an exclamation broke from his lips, for his eyes fell on something he had not bargained for, although at first it did not occur to him that it might be of service. It was a footbridge, an elevated, flimsy wooden structure that spanned the canal from side to side linking two footpaths. As he stood regarding it he heard a sound that set his pulses racing. It was the chug-chug-chug of engines.

'By Jove, here come the beastly barges,' he breathed, staring up the canal to where a long line of dark shadows had appeared on the placid water. For a moment or two he hesitated, thinking swiftly, and then drew a deep breath. 'If it comes off it ought to be fun,' he told himself. 'If it doesn't, I'm afraid that silly ass I brought here will have to walk home.' He waited no longer but, crouching low, ran quickly to the footbridge and wormed his way to the middle of it.

He had not long to wait, although in the circumstances the minutes seemed like hours.

Slowly but surely the heavy boats, low in the water, crept nearer. He removed the cover from the parcel by his side. He found the firing plunger and forced it home. 'I hope that chappie didn't make any mistake about that fuse,' he murmured.

Lying flat, he looked along the line of boats, the first one now less than fifty yards away and the others following at short intervals. They looked unreal. He could see the steersman of the leading boat clearly, a burly fellow, smoking a long pipe as he leaned against the heavy rudder. Were there any other men on board? He did not know, but he hoped not. With his revolver in his right hand and the bomb in his left, he waited until the barge drew level. The bows passed under the bridge, creating a sensation that he himself was moving. He tensed his muscles; then, as the steersman drew level, he dropped; and as he dropped, he struck.

But an object moving in the dark is a deceptive target; moreover, he was to some extent encumbered by his burden. And instead of the butt of the revolver hitting the man on the head as he intended, it caught him on the shoulder.

His startled cry was cut short by Bertie, who landed on top of him, and together they rolled down the short companionway into the cabin.

Bertie, being the more agile, was up first. He had dropped the bomb, but he still retained his grip on the revolver, although he dare not

make full use of it because of the alarm the report would inevitably cause. So, grasping the muzzle and swinging the weapon like a club, he sprang at the bargee. But his adversary was no fool and, seeing how Bertie was armed, he promptly sent the candle, which provided the only light, spinning across the room.

Now Bertie was not so foolish as to enter willingly into a wrestling bout with a man twice his weight — certainly not in the dark; so he darted up the steps and vaulted over the low superstructure at the top. He was round in a flash, crouching low, waiting for the man who he felt certain would follow him. And he was not mistaken. He heard him muttering and cursing in German as he came blundering up the stairs; but it seemed that he had a good idea of what to expect, for as Bertie struck at him again he ducked with surprising agility, and Bertie all but lost his balance. But he did not lose his head, and as the man jumped clear he leapt at him like a cat.

The German instinctively stepped backwards, evidently forgetting where he was, which was close to the outside extremity of the deck. He made a desperate effort to keep his balance, but Bertie, seizing his opportunity, dashed in and knocked him over backwards.

There was a terrific splash as the man went overboard.

Bertie waited long enough to see him start swimming towards the bank, and then turned his attention to the bomb. As near as he could judge, the fuse had been burning for five minutes, which gave him another ten minutes' grace; so he picked it up and ran along the side of the barge looking for the best place to put it. Heavy black tarpaulins had been lashed over the cargo, and for this reason he could not see it; nor had he time to investigate, for the boatman was now running along the bank yelling at the top of his voice. Hunting about quickly, Bertie found a partition between two tarpaulins just about amidships, and this, he decided, would have to suit his purpose. He thrust the bomb into the gap, and then looked about anxiously for a way of escape.

The situation was even worse than he expected. The second barge, apparently suspecting that something was wrong, had closed up until it was only a few yards behind. From the opposite direction, the direction of the lock, a party of soldiers was running along the towing-path, on the same side of the canal as he had left the aircraft. There seemed to be only one course left open to him, and he lost no time in taking it. Seizing the rudder, he threw his weight against it and

brought the barge over until it was running along within a few feet of the opposite bank — that is to say the bank farthest from the soldiers, who were now less than fifty yards away. He wondered vaguely why they did not shoot, for he knew that they must be able to see him; then he remembered the dangerous cargo the barge carried, and understood their reluctance to use firearms.

At this moment a second man, who must have been asleep below, came scrambling up to the deck. He let out a yell when he saw what was happening.

Bertie waited no longer. He took a flying leap at the bank, landed on all fours, and threw himself over the embankment just as a bullet whistled past his ear. But the embankment was as good as the parapet of a trench, and he took advantage of it, running like a plover towards the bridge as fast as his legs could carry him. When he was about half-way he risked a peep at the opposite bank, and saw at a glance that his hopes of getting back to the machine, via the bridge, were very slim,

for two or three of the soldiers had kept pace with him and were likely to reach the bridge before him. He perceived that the nearer to the bridge he went, the nearer he would be to the Germans when they crossed over, for such was obviously their intention, so he turned off at a tangent, making for a wood that stood on some rising ground not far away.

Two or three shots were fired as he ran, but none came near him and, reaching his immediate objective, he looked back in the direction of the lock to see what was going on. At first he could not quite make out what had happened, but it seemed as if the leading barge had run into the bank a few yards short of the lock. The next one, possibly because it had too much way on it to stop, had passed it; the others had closed up and stopped, to await their turn to pass through the lock.

Curiously enough, Bertie had either forgotten the bomb or else he was unaware that the time limit had expired; at any rate no thought of it was in his mind when the explosion occurred. At first there was a single, sharp, clearly defined detonation, but it was followed instantly by an explosion, and a blast of air so violent that even at that distance it threw him to the ground. For a full minute the roar persisted, like a continuous roll of thunder while the heavens were lighted up by an orange glare that revealed the landscape as clearly as if it were broad daylight. Then the light faded, and the terrible roar was succeeded by

an ominous silence. Perhaps it would be more correct to say a comparative silence, for in a moment Or two strange sounds were borne on the air, the most clearly defined being the noise of rushing water.

'By jingo, that was a bit hot,' muttered Bertie, groping about for his eyeglass, which had been blown from his face by the concussion. He soon realized the futility of trying to find it in such conditions, so getting up, he stared towards the lock trying to make out what had happened. The landscape seemed to have changed. Of the lock and the barges there was no sign. The canal no longer gleamed in the moonlight. It appeared now as a sinister black shadow that widened swiftly as it neared the place where the lock had been, and thereafter lost itself in a turbulent lake that seemed to reach to the horizon.

'By Jove, I'm afraid that's done it,' he muttered uneasily, as a horrid thought entered his head. A second and more penetrating look, and his worst fears were realized. Where the lock had been, the bank of the canal had completely disappeared. So had the lock. The water, millions of gallons of it, had poured through the breach, with the result that the canal was practically empty. But it was not this that upset him. It was the direction in which most of the water had overflowed. From where he stood he could not see his machine, but if it was still where he had left it — which seemed unlikely — then it was in the middle of a lake. Of the German troops who had run up the towing-path there was no sign, and It could only assume that they had gone back to the scene of the explosion.

He started off towards the canal, crossed over the bridge, and entered the water that covered the low-lying marsh on the other side. This, he was relieved to find, was only ankle-deep in most places, with occasional deeper patches. In these conditions it was not easy to locate the exact spot where he had left the aircraft, but when he reached what he felt certain was the place, that which he feared might have happened was confirmed. It had gone. On all sides stretched the water, and had it not been for an occasional tree and hedge, he might have been gazing at an ocean.

A faint hail attracted his attention. He recognized the voice and hurried towards the spot.

As he approached he could just make out the shape of the machine. When he got to it he found the agent standing in his seat, muttering incoherently; but Bertie paid no attention to him; he was concerned only with the aircraft which, as far as he could make out, had been

lifted bodily by the first rush of the flood and swept away until a hedge had arrested its progress. The fabric was torn in several places, but a quick examination revealed no sign of structural damage.

Hi, fellow, come on out of that and help me to straighten her up,' he told his useless accomplice curtly.

The amateur agent continued to protest that all was lost, whereupon Bertie, his patience exhausted at last, swung himself up, caught the man by the scruff of the neck and dragged him bodily out of the cockpit.

'One more bleat from you, my little sheep, and I'll give you a kick in the pants that will make you think you've sat on a rocket. Come along now and give me a hand.'

Between them they got the machine clear of the hedge, facing the open water. The engine was started and they scrambled into their seats.

The take-off was a nightmare. A seaplane would not have raised as much spray. But the light machine unstuck at last, and with a jubilant Yoicks 1' Bertie headed for home, which he reached without further mishap.

The entire squadron was waiting for him when he landed. How did you get on?' asked Biggles eagerly, as Bertie jumped down.

Oh, not bad, sir, not half bad,' answered Bertie.

It all went off according to plan, eh?'

'No jolly fear it didn't,' declared Bertie soberly.

What went wrong?'

Something pretty serious,' announced Bertie. 'I lost my beastly eyeglass in the dark. I call that pretty steep, don't you - what ?'

Document Outline

- 06-49 plain
 - ☐ [Page 1](#)
 - ☐ [Page 2](#)
 - ☐ [Page 3](#)
 - ☐ [Page 4](#)
 - ☐ [Page 5](#)
 - ☐ [Page 6](#)
 - ☐ [Page 7](#)
 - ☐ [Page 8](#)
 - ☐ [Page 9](#)
 - ☐ [Page 10](#)
 - ☐ [Page 11](#)
 - ☐ [Page 12](#)
 - ☐ [Page 13](#)
 - ☐ [Page 14](#)
 - ☐ [Page 15](#)
 - ☐ [Page 16](#)
 - ☐ [Page 17](#)
 - ☐ [Page 18](#)
 - ☐ [Page 19](#)
 - ☐ [Page 20](#)
 - ☐ [Page 21](#)
 - ☐ [Page 22](#)
- 50-61 plain
 - ☐ [Page 1](#)
 - ☐ [Page 2](#)
 - ☐ [Page 3](#)
 - ☐ [Page 4](#)
 - ☐ [Page 5](#)
 - ☐ [Page 6](#)
- 62-99 plain
 - ☐ [Page 1](#)
 - ☐ [Page 2](#)
 - ☐ [Page 3](#)
 - ☐ [Page 4](#)
 - ☐ [Page 5](#)
 - ☐ [Page 6](#)
 - ☐ [Page 7](#)
 - ☐ [Page 8](#)
 - ☐ [Page 9](#)
 - ☐ [Page 10](#)
 - ☐ [Page 11](#)

- ☐ [Page 12](#)
- ☐ [Page 13](#)
- ☐ [Page 14](#)
- ☐ [Page 15](#)
- ☐ [Page 16](#)
- ☐ [Page 17](#)
- ☐ [Page 18](#)
- ☐ [Page 19](#)

• 100-149 plain

- ☐ [Page 1](#)
- ☐ [Page 2](#)
- ☐ [Page 3](#)
- ☐ [Page 4](#)
- ☐ [Page 5](#)
- ☐ [Page 6](#)
- ☐ [Page 7](#)
- ☐ [Page 8](#)
- ☐ [Page 9](#)
- ☐ [Page 10](#)
- ☐ [Page 11](#)
- ☐ [Page 12](#)
- ☐ [Page 13](#)
- ☐ [Page 14](#)
- ☐ [Page 15](#)
- ☐ [Page 16](#)
- ☐ [Page 17](#)
- ☐ [Page 18](#)
- ☐ [Page 19](#)
- ☐ [Page 20](#)
- ☐ [Page 21](#)
- ☐ [Page 22](#)
- ☐ [Page 23](#)
- ☐ [Page 24](#)
- ☐ [Page 25](#)

• 150-184 plain

- ☐ [Page 1](#)
- ☐ [Page 2](#)
- ☐ [Page 3](#)
- ☐ [Page 4](#)
- ☐ [Page 5](#)
- ☐ [Page 6](#)
- ☐ [Page 7](#)
- ☐ [Page 8](#)
- ☐ [Page 9](#)

- ☐ [Page 10](#)
- ☐ [Page 11](#)
- ☐ [Page 12](#)
- ☐ [Page 13](#)
- ☐ [Page 14](#)
- ☐ [Page 15](#)
- ☐ [Page 16](#)
- ☐ [Page 17](#)
- ☐ [Page 18](#)